

# SISTAH VEGAN

BLACK FEMALE VEGANS  
SPEAK ON FOOD, IDENTITY,  
HEALTH, AND SOCIETY

A. BREEZE HARPER  
EDITOR



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Lantern Books • New York  
A Division of Booklight, Inc.

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2010

Lantern Books  
128 Second Place  
Brooklyn, NY 11231  
[www.lanternbooks.com](http://www.lanternbooks.com)

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Cover artwork: “Yum!” by Janine Jackson, 2006. Jackson says about the piece: “Delicious. Nourishing. Life. Various recipes swirl about her reminding her of the multiple delights she experiences while consuming natural foods. Yum!”

**Notice:** This book is intended as a reference volume only, not as a medical manual. The information given here is designed to help you make informed decisions about your health. It's not intended as a substitute for any treatment that may have been prescribed or recommendations given by your health care provider. If you suspect that you have a medical problem, we urge you to seek competent medical help.

Printed in Canada

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Sistah vegan : food, identity, health, and society : black female vegans speak / A. Breeze Harper.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59056-145-4 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-59056-145-7 (alk. paper)

1. Vegetarianism—United States. 2. Veganism—United States. 3. African American women. I Harper, A. Breeze.

TX392.S56 2009

641.5'636—dc22

2009015277

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## APPRECIATIONS

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There are so many people to thank and acknowledge who supported me through this project and through life in general!

Thanks Dad for first introducing me to the world of herbalism and holistic health while I was growing up. Thanks Mom and Talmadge for always encouraging me to write and to approach whatever I am passionate about with confidence.

Much love, gratitude, and appreciation to Oliver, for being a wonderful soul mate and introducing me to compassionate consumption and mindful living.

Dick Gregory and Queen Afua: Although I have never met you in real life, your philosophies too my activism—in terms of empowering Black people—to a holistic level. I hope to one day meet you lovely spirits.

Thich Nhat Hanh: Your translation of the fourteen precepts in your book *Inter-Being* is a blessing. I meditate on it every week to remember that my health and food activism should continue to be grounded in compassion, love, and nonviolence.

Bryant, your brilliance as a food-justice chef and author continue to inspire me. Thank you for being a positive force for people of color and food-justice activism.

Emily, our food, health, and feminist brainstorming “chit chats” have helped encourage me to develop this anthology in creative and thought-provoking ways. Thanks!

Raquel, my twin sis! So glad you came into my life and I appreciate your wisdom at such a young age.

Jason, your dedication to your activism with your Oakland Food Connection constantly inspires me and keeps me on the path of doing the work that I do. Thank you for being part of my life!

Tulaine, thank you for teaching me about leadership as well as compassion, when addressing the emotional subject of health and food with my peers.

Noah, I am glad my initial email to you did not scare you away! I am forever grateful for your support and courage to fight against the status quo and inequality for nonhuman animals and human animals. Thanks for being an ally, despite the challenges you faced in your animal-right work.

Kevin, thank you for “getting it” and constantly sending me news about local and global injustices about food, environment, and health, around the world.

Frances Ufkes, thank you for introducing me to the wonderful world of Food and Geography as a freshman year at Dartmouth College. Since then, I have never looked at food quite the same way.

Zoe E. Masongsong, thank you so much for volunteering to help Sistah Vegans edit their anthology pieces. This was a truly a selfless act and I know some sistahs may not have had the confidence to submit their creative-genius pieces had you not been there to let them know they could do it.

Derrick, you always said I could do it. Thank you for your support and believing in my potential to publish this project.

Pandora, my beautiful sistah: our intense dialogues about healing, love, food, institutionalized racism, and life in general have helped me to never forget that “we are what we've been waiting for.” Thank you for such a tremendous gift.

Sister Jayne, I love you big sister! Thank you for your love and support. Your enthusiasm for health and food activism has helped me stay on my spiritual path to help humanity understand that we have the power of the divine within ourselves to be our own healers.

To the staff at Lantern Books, thank you for believing in the importance of this book, and for

giving it such care and attention through the process.

~~Lastly, thank you Holly and Uriel, my best buds since freshman year in college. Your trust in me to help heal your ailments through the years made me realize that I can be a leader and teacher of holistic healing through literary activism, and share my wisdom with all who are willing to embrace it.~~

A. Breeze Harper

## PREFACE

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In 2006, Dr. Ian Smith partnered with State Farm Insurance to issue a clarion call in promoting healthier lives and more nutritious diets, primarily among African-Americans. As the latest data illustrate, obesity is the number one health crisis facing all Americans—children and adults alike. The statistics on African-Americans are almost at an extreme, with the majority of adult women and men being categorically defined as overweight. As more and more young people of color contract Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and even heart disease, the combination of poor diet, lack of exercise, and inadequate medical guidance and care is all the more lethal.

At least one solution is being provided by Smith's "50 Million Pound Challenge." Other solutions, however, can be found in taking control over one's life by engaging in a more conscious effort to consume foods that are deemed whole—fresh (organic even) fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and so on. To be sure, making healthier lifestyle decisions is key to living longer and stronger.

But how is this option possible when one has little or no control over one's environment? How are making healthy lifestyle choices directly tied to issues of racism—environmental and medical—and even genocide? These and other questions are at the heart of the *Sistah Vegan* anthology.

This book brings to the fore an awareness that adopting a lifestyle of vegetarianism and veganism is not limited to one racial or age group. Rather, there are many people of color who adhere to this way of thinking, consuming, and engaging the earth and its bounty. In the instance of this powerful anthology, voices come from far and wide to represent women of color who speak not only to food and choice, but also to food and its intersections with numerous forms of injustice that are insidiously destructive to their lives.

As one of few, if any, major works to address such intersections, this anthology is poised to reveal several realities about the ways that Black and other bodies of color ingest and digest the glaring racial disparities of our nation's health system. From medical misdiagnoses to the lack of adequate health care and on, many people of color suffer needlessly. When you combine this reality with the fact that the majority of neighborhoods of color promote junk foods—from triple-layer cheeseburgers to forty ounces of malt liquor, to the latest and greatest sugary cereal—and that these locations are wholly deficient in offering grocery stores that provide fresh and affordable produce, then living healthier is not simply about choice. It is also about choices that get made to grant and deny access to a better way of life. Consequently, a lifestyle of health is also about inherent race and class discrimination. This anthology gives voice to these disparities and highlights their consequences.

What the sistah vegans tell us is that we, as people of color, can no longer live by mainstream definitions. For example, we cannot all drink milk and eat foods from the bread and cereal groups, especially when these foods do not represent our ethnic heritage. Moreover, it is not ethical and it is certainly not culturally appropriate to insist that we do so. Society could, however, provide nutritional advice on how to eat the foods that *are* culturally specific in ways that will promote optimum health. Women of color need to reclaim their voice on the cafeteria lines and insist that their children be given foods that not only are nutritious but reflect their cultural space—sweet potatoes, okra, collard greens, brown rice, corn tortillas, and so on. This anthology begins to enlighten us on this process; we must pass the word and follow suit.

I am not a vegan. My own contributions to this anthology are through food studies and Black women's studies. As a woman of color who was introduced to the dangers of a diet high in sugar, salt, fat, and refined carbohydrates early in my life, I long ago decided to eat whole. Not trim and thin by any means, I perhaps fall into the category of being a full-figured sistah living in a society that defines healthy as the antithesis of my appearance. I am blessed, however, to have the knowledge and



understanding of what refined foods and meat products can and will ultimately do to our bodies. I am also clear about what it means to eat healthily in order to live longer. But I make informed choices. I have access to healthy foods of every variety and I pay handsomely for them. This is all to say that knowledge is power, and that knowledge also provides a certain amount of access.

A. Breeze Harper has assembled a fascinating variety of writings to heighten our awareness and consciousness of what it means to “decolonize our bodies, minds, and spirits.” We would do well to read and to take individual and collective action, to combat the injustices and disparities—including those of the culinary nature—that continue to pervade our society!

Dr. Psyche Williams-Forsion

University of Maryland, College Park

## THE BIRTH OF THE SISTAH VEGAN PROJECT

*A. Breeze Harper*

During one evening in the summer of 2005, I strolled through the latest discussion boards of [BlackPlanet.com](http://BlackPlanet.com) and found a discussion forum that centered on a controversial ad, “The Animal Liberation Project,” which PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) had created. As I read the content of the forum, I learned that the NAACP had been pushing to censor a PETA ad because of the “offensive” content the organization felt it contained. Within seconds, I found the PETA site and began to watch the campaign video advertisement. In my opinion, it appeared that PETA was trying to capture viewers and induce “critical consciousness” in them to question their own normative practices with respect to human-to-nonhuman animal relationships.

My eyes stayed glued to the images of human suffering juxtaposed with nonhuman animal suffering: a painting of Native Americans on the Trail of Tears positioned next to a photo of herds of nonhuman animals being led to their demise; the atrocity of a Black man's lynched and torched body next to a picture of an animal that had been burned; a black-and-white Jewish Holocaust photo next to animals in confined, crammed structures on a meat-production farm. As I watched, I realized that most images were of Black Americans drawn from America's cruel past of slavery and Jim Crow segregation.

I navigated my web browser back to the [BlackPlanet.com](http://BlackPlanet.com) forum and read all the contributions from the PETA forum discussion. Twenty-eight Black-identified people had voiced their opinion about the ad; only one participant agreed with the anti-speciesism message that PETA was trying to promote with the ad.<sup>1</sup> Everyone else agreed that PETA was an organization filled with “white racists” who think that Black-identified people are “on the same level as animals.”

As I attempted to understand the PETA campaign and the [BlackPlanet.com](http://BlackPlanet.com) participants' anger, I drew upon the books I had recently read by Marjorie Spiegel and Charles Patterson.<sup>2</sup> With those titles as a foundation, I could assume that PETA's campaign was implying that the exploitation and torture of nonhuman animals come from the same master/oppressor ideology that created atrocities such as African slavery, Native American genocide, and the Jewish Holocaust. In *The Dreaded Comparison*, Spiegel notes:

Comparing the suffering of animals to that of Blacks (or any other oppressed group) is offensive only to the speciesist: one who has embraced the false notions of what animals are like. Those who are offended by comparison to a fellow sufferer have unquestioningly accepted the biased worldview presented by the masters. To deny our similarities to animals is to deny and undermine our own power. It is to continue actively struggling to prove to our masters, past or present, that we are similar to those who have abused us, rather than to our fellow victims, those whom our masters have also victimized.

This is not intended to oversimplify matters and to imply that the oppressions experienced by Blacks and animals have taken identical forms—but, as divergent as the cruelties and the supporting systems of oppression may be, there are commonalities between them. They share the same basic relationship—that between oppressor and oppressed.<sup>3</sup>

Even though I am an animal-rights supporter, I feel that PETA's campaign strategies often fail to give a historical context for why they use certain images that are connected to a painful history of racially motivated violence against particular nonwhite, racialized humans. In the years prior to PETA's debacle, Spiegel and Patterson provided sensitive, scholarly explorations of these topics, whereas the PETA exhibit, and the ensuing controversy, were handled insensitively. The lack of sociohistorical context by PETA is perhaps what is upsetting to many racial minorities, for whom such images and textual references trigger trauma and deep emotional pain.

Now, this doesn't mean that *all* those in the United States who were offended by PETA absolutely don't care about the suffering of animals; it's much more complex than a simple binary of "we care" versus "we don't care" about animal suffering. But I do believe it means that the wounds and scars of the United States's sordid history of violent racism, in which Black Americans were *derogatorily* categorized as animals within a racist colonial context (I understand that outside of this context being called an "animal" isn't derogatory), need to be addressed and reconciled at a national level that we have yet to see. In addition, PETA campaign strategists could be more cognizant of the consequences of not offering a sociohistorical context to many of their outreach campaigns that contain emotionally sensitive materials.

It has been over four years since I first viewed "The Animal Liberation Project." I have been thinking more in depth, and I have begun to reexamine veganism as an alternative, food way of life movement, as well as a personal health choice from a Black feminist, antiracist, and decolonizing perspective. I hope that the *Sistah Vegan* anthology can help start formulating answers to the following questions:

1. How are Black female vegans using veganism and other holistic health practices to decolonize their bodies and engage in health activism that resists institutionalized racism and neocolonialism?
2. Bodies in vegetarian/vegan, organic, and alternative-living advertisements are depicted as mostly white and thin, showing an underlying theme of "veganism equals thin white body." How does this affect Black females' willingness to explore vegetarianism/veganism when the full-sized body is typically accepted as healthy and beautiful in the North American Black community?
3. As indicated in the [BlackPlanet.com](https://www.blackplanet.com) forum, is it that some Black Americans do not want to embrace an ethical eating philosophy because they do not care, or is it that they perceive it as only being part of a legacy of white racism and an elitist view of culinary ideologies?<sup>4</sup>
4. If a majority of Black people have had negative experiences with "whiteness as the norm" (because of collective experiences of racism/classism), and they have come to believe that veganism or an ethical eating philosophy is a "white thing" and in no way connected to deconstructing institutionalized racism/classism, how can sistah vegans and allies present a model that presents veganism and vegetarianism as a tool that simultaneously resists (a) institutionalized racism/classism, (b) environmental degradation, and (c) high rates of health diseases plaguing the Black community?

Alka Chandna, a woman of color from Canada and a research associate with PETA, wrote commentary about the NAACP reaction to the advertisement. In her recollection, she writes about how acts of racism were directed toward her family's house. One of her memories is of eggs being thrown because her brown family was not welcomed in the community. However, she is perplexed by the NAACP attacks on the PETA campaign:

Although the photos of poor immigrants, children used in forced labor, Native Americans, and

African slaves are extremely upsetting, why is it so shocking to suggest that the mindset that condoned exploitation of people in the past is the same as the mindset that permits today's abuse of animals in laboratories, in factory farms, and on fur farms? And why is it assumed that this display—and indeed the entire animal-rights movement—was generated by insensitive white people? As a person of color, I am hurt and perplexed that my two decades of work in the animal-rights movement, as well as the efforts of my many colleagues who are people of color, are discounted. . . .

Here in the United States, the NAACP and others are now painting animal-rights activists as white racists in order to marginalize and dismiss us. I can't help but think that this sort of “analysis” that persists in painting our movement with a broad brush is the same disparagement that people engage in when the truth makes them uncomfortable. Racists dismissed Martin Luther King as a womanizer. Colonists dismissed Gandhi as a short brown man in a loincloth. Sexists dismiss feminists as ugly, angry women.

Yet many people of color work every day to change attitudes toward animals. My own beliefs, and those of many of my colleagues, sprang from an understanding of right versus wrong. It is not racism that inspires us, but justice. *I ask other people of color who have had eggs thrown at their windows or experienced other forms of racism to stop condemning for a moment and to consider that what they are now saying about animals—that animals are lesser beings whose suffering can be dismissed—was once said about them and was used as an excuse to keep them in bondage.*<sup>5</sup>

It is Dr. Chandna's last sentence that intrigued and motivated me to find Black-identified female who practice veganism, as well as support anti-speciesism and/or see the connections speciesism has to all the “isms.” Furthermore, the goal of *Sistah Vegan* is to function as an effective literary model for teaching about alternative health and decolonizing strategies that benefit personal health and the environment, while simultaneously resisting institutionalized racism, environmental pollution, and other legacies of Western colonialism.

### *Why I Chose to Practice Ahimsa-based Veganism*

I can honestly say that my transition into veganism was not a sudden overnight decision. It initially evolved from my childhood experiences with institutionalized racism, heterosexism, and sexism. Many people who have transitioned into veganism reference animal rights as the most important reason for their initial transition. Experiencing life as a working-class, Black-identified female led me eventually to practice *ahimsa*-based veganism from a different point of entry that didn't initially involve animal rights as the catalyst to my “awakening.”

When I was twelve years old, I entered the halls of Lyman Memorial Junior High School for my first day of seventh grade. The first greeting I heard was, “Look at that skinny little nigger. Run, skinny little nigger, run.” From this point on in my consciousness, I became very aware of my historically and socially constructed position in the United States through the unique fusion of Black/girl. Racially socialized and gendered through Eurocentric heteropatriarchal and capitalism-based society, my experiences differed drastically in comparison with my peers in our over-90 percent-white, rural town. Although whiteness was the “invisible” and comforting norm for the majority, it was the neverending and constantly visible, “in-your-face” foreign, and suffocating “norm” for me. It was expected that being teased for being “the Black girl” was what I'd have to accept, simply because none of my peers ever seemed to be reprimanded or chastised for being racist. Similarly, speciesism was the acceptable norm in my town; folk engaged in the sport of deer hunting,

turkey derbies, and using animals in the annual Lebanon Town Fair every August. Racism and speciesism simply ~~were~~ the norm, and the suffering and misery they caused ~~were~~ largely invisible to most.

Several years later, I began reading books that uncovered the roots of the types of oppressive acts encountered in high school and college. I read Black feminist writers like bell hooks, Audre Lord, and Patricia Hill Collins and then expanded into *ahimsa*-based philosophy by authors such as Jiddu Krishnamurti.

What truly moved me into practicing veganism was reading about Dick Gregory and seeing the connections he made to institutionalized racism/classism/sexism, Black liberation, the Black community's "health crisis," and dietary beliefs/practices. Dick Gregory, cited in Doris Witt's *Black Hunger*, notes:

I have experienced personally over the past few years how a purity of diet and thought are interrelated. And when Americans become truly concerned with the purity of the food that enters their own personal systems, when they learn to eat properly, we can expect to see profound changes effected in the social and political system of this nation. The two systems are inseparable.<sup>6</sup>

While being introduced to Dick Gregory's philosophies, I also began reading Queen Afua's *Sacred Woman*. She is a raw foodist who advocates womb health and harmony through veganism. It was with the help of these two critical thinkers that I finally saw the interconnectedness to my own "out of harmony" reproductive health (I had been diagnosed with a uterine fibroid and was seeking an alternative to allopathic medicine to address it) as a symptom of systematic racism, sexism, and nonhuman animal exploitation (which I would later learn is called "speciesism"). Immediately, I made the transition to *ahimsa*-based veganism. *Ahimsa* means a life of practicing noninjury or harmlessness to *all* living beings.<sup>7</sup>

After my introduction to Queen Afua and Dick Gregory, Spiegel's *The Dreaded Comparison* and Patterson's *Eternal Treblinka* further expanded my understanding of the interconnectedness of institutionalized racism, nationalism, and sexism; the mistreatment of nonhuman animals; and the abuse of the planet's natural resources. Eventually, years after I started down my path on that first day of seventh grade, I made the connections between institutionalized oppression and unmindful consumption and what it *means* to be socialized as a Black female in a society in which I must navigate through racist legacies of slavery, while simultaneously being part of an economically "privileged" global northern nation in which overconsumption is the "norm." It is this type of unique experience—the social implications and historical context of being both Black and female in a neocolonial global society—that has led me to request voices from females of the African diaspora living in the U.S.

### *The Ladies in the Sistah Vegan Project*

When I conducted research about Black health on my university's online library, I was inundated with articles that depicted how horrible the state of health is among the Black female population: that we continue to eat too much junk food and not enough fruits and vegetables; that we are addicted to junk food and postindustrialized Soul Food practices to the point of killing ourselves. Articles and essays painted a grim picture: Black females do not know how to combat these health disparities.

However, after receiving a plethora of imaginative and thought-provoking contributions, I saw that there are many of us who know how to fight back. This book holds a collection of narratives, poetry,

critical essays, and reflections from a diverse North American community of Black-identified females/females of the African Diaspora. Collectively, these ladies are actively decolonizing the bodies and minds via whole-foods veganism and/or raw foodism, resisting becoming a “health disparities” statistic by kicking the junk food habit, questioning the soulfulness of postindustrial Soul Food, raising children who have never tasted a McDonald's (not so) Happy Meal, and making the connections that compassionate consumption has to creating a compassionate and eco-sustainable society.

*Sistah Vegan* is not about preaching veganism or vegan fundamentalism. It is about looking at how a specific group of Black-identified female vegans perceive nutrition, food, ecological sustainability, health and healing, animal rights, parenting, social justice, spirituality, hair care, race, sexuality, womanism, freedom, and identity that goes against the (refined and bleached) grain. Not all contributors necessarily agree with each other, and that is the beauty of this edited volume: even though we do identify as Black and female, we are not a monolithic group. I hope that *Sistah Vegan* will be an inspirational and thought-provoking read for all who are interested in how dietary habits and food production connect to either the dismantling or maintenance of environmental racism, speciesism, ecological devastation, health disparities, institutional racism, overconsumption, and other social injustices.

I welcome your readership of the first book ever written by and about Black female vegans in North America. It's nice to finally be at the table with some food for thought.



# THINKING AND EATING AT THE SAME TIME

## REFLECTIONS OF A SISTAH VEGAN

*Michelle R. Loyd-Paige*

It was the Saturday after Thanksgiving in 2005. I was out shopping at the local mall when my husband called and asked me if I would pick up a six-piece chicken-wing snack for him on my way home because he was tired of the turkey leftovers. Soon after his call, I found myself at a fast-food chicken restaurant. I was standing in line trying to remember what type of sauce he said he wanted—*Was it the hot barbeque, the honey mustard, or the teriyaki? Was that with or without ranch dressing?*—when, from out of nowhere, I began wondering what happened to the rest of the bodies of the three chickens it took to create this snack for my husband that I was about to so casually order. Almost immediately, other questions popped into my head: *Just how many other people would stand in this same line in this restaurant to order chicken wings today? And how many other fast-food chicken restaurants are experiencing an increase in business today because people are out shopping and they are tired of leftover turkey from Thanksgiving? Just how many chickens were being grown for my husband, and three hundred million other Americans, could have chicken wings anytime they wanted—not to mention in the world?*

Little did I know that my questions about chicken wings on that day would lead to a radical change in the way I eat. Believe me, it's not that I have some great love for chickens as a part of God's creation and think that they should have the same sacred status as cows in India or humans in every part of the world. My thinking and eating habits changed as a result of what I call a *kairos* moment. *Kairos* is an ancient Greek word meaning the “right or opportune moment.”<sup>1</sup> In my faith tradition, it also means “the appointed time in the purpose of God.” At this appointed time, four previously unassociated thoughts—the content of a lecture I had just presented four days prior on the global inequities in food distribution; a vague recollection of a statement from PETA about the cruelty associated with chicken production; the remembrance of how surprisingly good I felt physically while on a forty-day spiritually motivated fast from meat and dairy at the beginning of the year; and my own desire to live an authentic life—yanked me into an uncomfortable realization that, when it came to food consumption, I was not living according to my beliefs.

I did purchase the chicken-wing snack for my husband, but with that sales transaction I began earnestly thinking about what I ate. I became conscious that what I ate was not merely a combination of taste preference, convenience, and cultural heritage. Before that moment in the chicken restaurant, I had given very little thought to how the food I enjoyed got to my table, and I certainly didn't think I was hurting anything or anyone. I am a socially aware college professor who challenges her students to think about how their social (and predominantly white) privilege supports the inequities that position people of color on the fault lines of life AND how their privilege allows them to be unconcerned about issues they do not think pertain to them. *How could I be guilty of the offense with which I indicted my students?*

As a middle-class citizen of the United States, I had been exercising status privilege every time I went to the grocery store or picked up a takeout dinner on my way home from work or shopping. It's a privilege to be able to eat what I want without ever having to think about how the food gets to my table. As I exercise this privilege, I am unconsciously participating in patterns of indifference and

oppression. *I was guilty of the offense with which I indicted my students!* And here was truth in a Styrofoam box, which held six whole chicken wings covered in hot barbeque sauce with a side of ranch dressing. The truth is that no matter how good a person I was, my eating habits were contrary to what I believed. All of my actions either contribute to patterns of social inequities or to the solution to the ills of our society. All social inequities are linked. Comprehensive systemic change will happen only if we are aware of these connections and work to bring an end to all inequalities—not just our favorites or the ones that most directly affect our part of the universe. No one is on the sidelines; by our actions or inactions, by our caring or our indifference, we are either part of the problem or part of the solution. I was beginning to see my lifestyle as it really was: a part of the problem and not part of the solution.

Not liking what I saw, I made a conscious decision to change my eating habits so that they would more closely represent my thinking on issues of social justice, the equitable use and distribution of global resources, and the health-diet-survival connection for African-Americans. Since my *kairos* moment in a chicken fast-food restaurant, I have chosen to eat like a vegan and have changed my shopping habits. I now buy fair trade tea and chocolate, and when possible, I purchase fresh and organic produce from local farmers. I do have a few nonvegan-friendly clothing items hanging in my closet from before my transformation, but none of my post-transformation clothing purchases contain animal skins or animal products.

My initiation into veganism actually occurred eleven months before that *kairos* moment in the fast-food chicken restaurant. I usually spend the first weekend of a new year on a personal spiritual retreat. In January 2005, I also participated in a month of fasting from meat, dairy, and sugar, facilitated by my church. The fast was voluntary and was supposed to *detoxify* the mind, body, and spirit. My church called it a “Daniel Fast.” With the exception of the sugar restriction, the diet fit the vegan way of eating—soybean products became the mainstay of family and church dinners. (I’m sure the local health-food store was wondering what was going on with *all* these Black people buying up everything soy during that month.)

Twenty of us stuck with the fast for the entire month without slipping back into old eating habits. We all saw improvements in our health. Not unexpectedly, we lost weight; I lost ten pounds. But to my surprise, by the end of the month I was also experiencing fewer hot flashes (associated with approaching menopause) and was sleeping better at night. However, as soon as the fast was over, I added poultry, dairy, and sugar products back into my diet. Red meat was no longer on the menu in my home because it was giving my daughter headaches and my husband had been told to change his diet in order to lower his cholesterol levels. A month after reintroducing these foods to my diet, the hot flashes began to return. Several months after the reintroduction of meat and dairy, right around the time of the chicken-restaurant moment, the hot flashes were becoming so bothersome that I actually began to think seriously about hormone replacement therapy. I spoke to my doctor, and he suggested that I first consider adding the soy back into my diet.

I now credit the end of my hot flashes to the elimination of all meat and dairy from my diet, the eating of organic produce (when possible), and the daily consumption of soy. January 2005 marked the beginning of my understanding of how food affects the functioning of my body. It was November 2005 that marked the beginning of my understanding of how the food I ate contributed to social inequalities, and it marked my transformation to eating like a vegan; in late November I began thinking and eating at the same time.

Thinking about what I was eating led me on a search for the answer to the question I had raised for myself about chicken consumption in the U.S. I discovered that in 2005 the total number of broilers—chickens raised for their meat—produced in the U.S. for the year was 8.87 billion.<sup>2</sup> “Each week



Pilgrim's Pride (the number-two poultry producer) turns about 30 million chickens into nuggets, wings, drumsticks, and sundry other parts." According to the National Chicken Council, "American consumers are eating an unprecedented 81 pounds of chicken per person this year . . . and plan to purchase more in the months to come."<sup>3</sup> The U.S. appetite for chicken has grown steadily since 1970 when the per-person average was 37 pounds.<sup>4</sup> Americans eat more chicken than beef (69 pounds) and pork (52 pounds). The amount of meat in a typical American diet far exceeds the daily allowance suggested by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's food pyramid.<sup>5</sup>

The sheer number of feed animals necessary to satisfy the American diet is staggering. In order to keep costs low and production high, animals and chickens are routinely crowded in to small pens or cages, mutilated, and drugged with antibiotics and growth hormones. Crowded and stressful conditions have been associated with feed animals and chickens becoming ill. Because chickens in such conditions will turn on each other, chickens are de-beaked so they will not kill each other. Feed animals that do not grow fast enough or are too old or sick are sometimes killed and ground into animal feed. Cows, who are by nature herbivores, are routinely fed a protein mixture prepared from ground cows.<sup>6</sup> Laying chicks who are the wrong sex are discarded in garbage bags—sometimes still living.<sup>7</sup> The conditions under which many feed animals are raised are inhumane. While humankind may have been granted dominion over animals,<sup>8</sup> I don't believe we were also given the right to be so cruel, brutal, and heartless in our treatment of them. Animals are a part of creation, just as human beings. Treating them so callously is symptomatic of a general disregard for anything our culture defines as inferior and expendable.

In the U.S., how we treat food animals is reminiscent of how people of color were treated. Andrea Smith made such a connection with Native women and children and animals in her book *Conquest*:

Native people often view their identities as inseparable from the rest of creation, and hence, creation requires care and respect, but colonizers viewed Indian identity as inseparably linked to animal and plant life, and deserving of destruction and mutilation. This equation between animals and Native people continues.<sup>9</sup>

Smith's statement was in the context of discussing the U.S. government's practices of medical experimentation on Native inhabitants in reservations. African-Americans have also been used as human guinea pigs for some of our government's medical experiments: The Tuskegee syphilis studies are a well-known example. Africans were brought to this country in mass numbers as slaves. They were chained together and kept in the cramped holds of ships as they crossed the Atlantic. In order to justify the brutality of slavery, the oppressors deemed Africans as less-than-human and undeserving of decent housing, education, food, health care, justice, or respect. African women who were enslaved were often used as breeders for a new crop of slaves. It was not uncommon for Africans who were too sick, too old, or too rebellious to be killed if it was thought cheaper to replace them than to keep them. Prized animals were often treated better than slaves.

Seeing a connection between the treatment of feed animals, laying chickens, and people of color is a rather recent phenomenon for me. Two years ago, I wouldn't have believed there was such a connection. Today, I know better. The connection becomes clear with a careful reading of our history and an understanding of the true nature of food production in the United States. The connection, however, is also observable by a thorough analysis of today's headlines and an informed critique of social policy and community life. Understanding the connection strengthens my resolve to continue eating like a vegan. Choosing to eat this way is a reminder to myself and a demonstration to those around me that all of creation is worthy of respect and humane treatment, even chickens.

At the time I raised my questions about chicken consumption, I was simply curious about how many chickens Americans ate. As I searched to satisfy my curiosity of that day, I have changed from wondering about numbers of chickens to the costs of the American diet. *What are the health-related costs to the lives of people eating a typical American diet? Why does it cost more to eat healthy? Why is it “unusual” to have a meal without meat? Why do feed animals need so many growth hormones and antibiotics in their feed? What do these animal growth hormones and antibiotics do in our human bodies? Why do we commit so much of our land and water resources to growing feed for animals when we could grow grain that is a healthier source of protein? Can we really afford to not know where our food comes from and how it is produced?* I am convinced that eating a meat-based diet—not to mention dairy products, eggs, and fish—is not only hazardous to food animals and harmful to the land, but, more important to me, perilous to the health of my people.

The top five leading causes of death among African-Americans are: heart disease, cancer, cerebrovascular disease, accidents, and diabetes.<sup>10</sup> Currently, 27 percent of deaths in the Black U.S. population are from heart disease, and the death rate from diabetes for Blacks is twice that of whites.<sup>11</sup> According to the American Heart Association, women of color are particularly vulnerable:

African-American and Hispanic women have higher prevalence rates of high blood pressure, obesity, physical inactivity, diabetes and metabolic syndrome than white women. Yet they are less likely than white women to know that being overweight, smoking, physical inactivity, high cholesterol and a family history of heart disease increase their heart disease risk.<sup>12</sup>

The prevalence of being overweight (including obesity) in African-American women is 77 percent; the prevalence of obesity is 49 percent.<sup>13</sup> Obesity has a strong correlation to diabetes. The traditional African-American diet is loaded with deep-fried chicken; meats are smothered in cream-based gravies; vegetables are slow-cooked with pork and pork fat until the color of the vegetables is no longer bright; and desserts are loaded with butter and cream. Soul Food (a.k.a. Southern home cooking or comfort food) is often jokingly referred to as a “heart-attack on plate.”

For African-Americans, however, it's no laughing matter. We are literally killing ourselves and decreasing our quality of life by the way we eat. Of the leading causes of death for African-Americans, all but one, accidents, have a connection to diet and lifestyle. Heart disease, obesity, and diabetes do not have to be such a prominent part of the African-American experience. Switching to an all-plant or nearly all-plant diet is one of the most effective ways to stop the progress of heart disease,<sup>14</sup> reversing the tendency to obesity, and controlling the onset of diabetes.

Every now and then my husband will ask me, “How long are you going to eat like this?” He used to ask because he and the rest of my immediate family thought that I wasn't going to get enough protein in my diet. Through my sharing of nutrition facts with them, they no longer think that eating like a vegan is unhealthy—strange for a Black person, perhaps, but not unhealthy. In fact, my husband has switched to soy butter and eats several meatless meals a week with me. My mother has also declared that a vegan restaurant I introduced her to is now one of her favorites and has dined there several times without me. Now when my husband asks, “How long are you going to eat like this?” it's because he has noticed that I no longer have hot flashes and he wants me to stay hot-flash-free, because “momma is happy, everybody is happy.” Although he appreciates the improvement in my comfort level and disposition, he and I are reminded of just how challenging it can be to maintain this lifestyle every time we try to go out for dinner, attend a birthday party, or go to a church potluck.

I'm the only vegan in my household. I think I'm the only Black female in all of western Michigan who eats like a vegan; if I'm not, it sure seems like it. There are no true vegan restaurants with

ninety miles of our home. The closest vegetarian restaurant is forty-eight miles away, in a trendy white, college-student side of town. ~~When we do go out to eat (which is not very often) I usually opt for a salad without meat or cheese.~~ Family holiday dinners, church potlucks, and birthday parties call for several different strategies. There's the "I'll be happy to bring something" so I can be sure there's at least one item I can eat; there's the "Really, I am full. I just ate, all I want is a glass of water" so I don't have to explain to sistah sistah why I'm not eating her prized chicken salad; and there are the times when I feel up to being an educator and I share with people why I no longer eat meat.

How long will I continue to eat like this? I can't see returning to eating meat, eggs, or dairy products, even with the inconveniences associated with eating out, dinner parties, church potlucks, family holiday dinners, and birthday parties. I am healthier now. I know too much now. I am committed to living an authentic life and to working for the elimination of all forms of injustice. I am now thinking and eating at the same time. There is no turning back.

## VEGANISM AND ECOWOMANISM

*Layli Phillips*

I want to talk about veganism as an expression of ecowomanist practice and philosophy. Ecowomanism is a social change perspective based on a holistic perception of creation encompassing humans and all living organisms plus the nonliving environment and the spirit world. The focus of ecowomanism is healing and honoring this collective human-environmental-spiritual superorganism through intentional social and environmental rebalancing as well as the spiritualization of human practices. Ecowomanism assumes that this superorganism has been wounded by careless human endeavor and that this damage hurts humans, animals, plants, and the nonliving environment—and offends the spirit(s).

Veganism is an expression of ecowomanism because it is a practice rooted in conscious harmlessness, which is a major tenet of ecowomanism's healing praxis.<sup>1</sup> Conscious harmlessness is closely aligned with the principles of *ahimsa* as expounded in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist scripture. *Ahimsa* means nonviolence and respect for all life. While individuals vary in the degree to which they practice various aspects of veganism (or even whether they practice veganism at all), the assumption of ecowomanism, being a gentle philosophy, is that all movement toward greater harmlessness is of value, regardless of an individual's starting point. Veganism is a strong expression of conscious harmlessness toward animals and plants and the earth's other resources. It is aligned with a variety of spiritual belief systems that suggest a relationship between biological self-purification and spiritual growth. Thus, from an ecowomanist perspective, veganism supports both physical and spiritual well-being at both collective and individual levels. Last but not least, veganism is an expression of love, and love is a central social change modality within both womanism and ecowomanism.<sup>2</sup> Love, broadly conceived, is an expansive and enlivening force that counteracts the restrictive and deadening forces of fear and anger. Thus, love is a social change modality while veganism is a healing tool for people and the earth.

The story of my own gradual transition into veganism is closely intertwined with the story of my transition into womanist philosophy. Before I tell that story, however, I will explain my perspective on both veganism and womanism, particularly for readers who may be unfamiliar with either.

### *Veganism*

*Veganism*, as I define it now, can be described at its simplest as the practice of refusing animal-based foods and products. Most vegans, however, espouse a more complex set of beliefs and practices, including an interest in environmental sustainability and social justice in the production of food; a preference for organic and minimally processed foods that have not been genetically modified (non-GMOs); adherence to principles of food combining and healing through plant-based foodstuff; support for products that have not been subjected to animal testing; interest in alternative, naturalistic, or integral health/medicinal practices; and an overall concern for mind-body wellness. Thus, veganism is not just a way of eating; it is a way of life.

People choosing veganism offer a number of distinct rationales, from practical to ethical: disliking meat; love of animals; health concerns; politico-economic commitments; and philosophical or spiritual beliefs. Many people who are vegans endorse several of these rationales simultaneously.

People who advocate for or practice veganism based on a love for animals often argue that animal

like humans, have rights. Being sentient creatures, animals have feelings and experience pain and pleasure. They become stressed by the farming practices (such as overcrowding, confinement, injection of hormones and antibiotics, bodily mutilation or medical neglect, and consumption of unnatural feedstuffs) and the life-terminating procedures used in meat production.<sup>3</sup> Animal experimentation is considered cruel and unnecessary; it is assumed that not only are alternative means of product testing available that can ensure human safety, but also that products that cannot be safely tested without harming humans or animals shouldn't be offered for human use.<sup>4</sup> People who choose veganism based on a love for animals are most likely to reject not only animal-based food but also other animal-based products, such as leather, various cosmetics (for example, lipstick, which often contains bat dung, or shampoo, which often contains placental byproducts), and medicines derived from animal sources. For these individuals, alternative shoes and clothes, cosmetics, and remedies are available.

People who choose veganism based on health concerns are often worried about the effect of stressed, diseased, and/or drugged animal flesh on the human body. These individuals are also aware of the length of time that meat takes to digest in the human intestinal system and the likelihood of putrefaction during that process, which leads to a variety of human ailments, from flatulence and constipation, to halitosis, skin problems, parasites, and even, potentially, colon cancer.<sup>5</sup> Hormones injected into animals to stimulate milk production or to affect the quality of meat contribute to the over-estrogenization of humans, disrupting the hormonal balance in children and adults, resulting in everything from early puberty and premenstrual syndrome (PMS) to infertility.<sup>6</sup> Antibiotics administered to animals contribute to the development of drug-resistant bacterial strains, thus increasing the risk of bacteria-based illnesses in both animals and humans. In addition, vegans with health concerns often wonder whether animals fed unnatural foodstuffs (for example, fat-soaked newspaper, the offal of their farm-mates, or GMO grain) can actually yield healthful food for humans. Factory-farmed animals drink pesticide- and hormone-laced water, indirectly transferring these chemicals to the human system. For people with health concerns, meat eating is just plain risky. Vegans whose primary rationale is health-related are also those most likely to insist that their plant-based foodstuffs meet the highest standards of purity and safety.

Vegans whose chief concern is the relationship between the consumption of animal products and other politico-economic considerations may focus on a variety of problems. For instance, vegans and ecofeminists focus on the symbolic connection between meat production, the oppression of women, and pornography (the dissection, objectification, sale, and consumption of women and animals). Other vegans are concerned with the relation between factory farming and the destruction of the world's rainforests, particularly for cattle production. This links to a concern with global warming, which is exacerbated by removal of carbon repositories such as trees.<sup>8</sup> Some vegans are concerned about economic justice and fair trade practices, particularly how large-scale meat production can interfere with local, diversified economies and family farms, and divert needed natural resources such as water and land, away from people who already live at subsistence levels, particularly in countries outside the U.S. Some people are morally opposed to large corporations, hyperconsumption, and the excesses of capitalism generally and express this sentiment through veganism. They may pay particular attention to who makes or sells the products they consume.

People whose veganism is rooted in philosophical or spiritual beliefs are often aligned with, or students of, religions and faiths that advocate nonviolence or restrict the consumption of animal foods. Religions, including but not limited to Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and the Baha'i Faith, all advocate a plant-based diet somewhere within their writings or traditions.<sup>9</sup> In some instances, veganism is considered a form of mercy or respect for animals;



other cases, veganism is a way to protect the body as a temple for the spirit and thus to prepare physical substrate for enlightenment. In *The Essene Gospels of Peace: Book 1*, for example, one discovers that Jesus advocated a vegan, raw-foods diet (and even colonic irrigations!).<sup>10</sup> Some ecospiritual, nature-based, and pagan traditions also endorse veganism. In addition to these religious and spiritual perspectives, there have historically also been particular philosophical traditions that advocate veganism. At this point in time, veganism itself is considered a philosophical tradition, even a religion, by some.

While veganism may sound rigid and ideological, I would argue that this is a misconception. While some vegans, for instance members of the Straight Edge community, demand unwavering commitment to vegan ideals and practices, many people practice some form of partial veganism. For instance, many vegans refrain from eating meat, dairy, and eggs, yet eat honey or wear leather. Other vegans shop vegan and eat vegan at home but look the other way at a vegetarian restaurant for dishes that use a small amount of butter, cream, or cheese. Some vegans may take a bite of cake that contains eggs at the party of a really good friend who isn't vegan. Some vegans are vegan everywhere except at their grandmother's house! You get the idea: for many people, veganism is a principle, not a law. Some hardcore vegans reject these "sloppier" vegans as profligates, but an ecowomanist perspective, as I mentioned above, would be gentler, respecting nonjudgmentally an individual's right to decide when and where they will engage in veganism (or any other dietary practice). Having said that, let me now turn my attention to womanism.

### Womanism

As I have defined it in my article, "Womanism on Its Own," in *The Womanist Reader*, womanism "is a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension."<sup>11</sup> Thus, womanism is a tripartite theory, philosophy, praxis—whatever you want to call it—that rests upon three intertwined relationships: humans to humans, humans to environment, and humans to the spirit world. The assumption is that imbalance and the need for healing or rectification exist in all these relationships; the agency of the womanist is to promote and advance healing in any or all of these areas. Social change is thus equated with healing. Ecowomanism, in particular, is most concerned with the human-to-environment relationship, but not without regard for the way human group dynamics and the spirit world are fundamentally interconnected with it. Stated differently, all of these entities—humans, the environment, and the spirit world—interpenetrate and co-constitute each other; they are not really separate, even though we talk as though they are. This axiom underlies and animates womanism.

Stated succinctly, womanism exhibits five overarching characteristics: 1) It is antioppressionist; 2) it is vernacular; 3) it is nonideological; 4) it is communitarian; and 5) it is spiritualized. That is, it is concerned nonpreferentially with all forms of oppression, named and unnamed; it is identified with and gains its soul from everyday people; it neither advocates nor enforces a party line and instead recognizes only the quest for the betterment of humankind in its relationship to nature and the spirit world; it rests on the principle of commonwealth, which requires the harmonization and coordination of the interests of individuals and diverse collectivities; and it takes spirit—however defined—as a given, allowing spirit to infuse all politics and progress. Given its breadth, its overt spirituality, and its operationalization of social change as healing rather than protest, integration rather than disruption, I argue that womanism is not a form of feminism, but rather is a distinct and independent (albeit mutually reinforcing) perspective.<sup>12</sup>

Ecowomanism is most evident in the life work of Alice Walker, who coined the term “womanist” in 1979 and whose subsequent writing, activism, and spiritual pursuits have given meaning and illustration to the womanist idea.<sup>13</sup> At a time when nonracial, nongender, and non-class-based political concerns were not on the forefront of Black feminist discourse, Walker confronted and contested militarism, nuclear proliferation, environmental destruction, and other issues.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, she followed a nontraditional spiritual course that empowered and spiritualized her politics and art.<sup>15</sup>

Other womanist authors and activists also evidence an ecowomanist perspective. Notably, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi brings two important issues to bear: first, she notes that womanist praxis concerns itself with environmentalism as part of an overall strategy for healing human society and reconciling humans with nature and humans with the spirit world (which resides in, infuses, and speaks through nature).<sup>16</sup> Using Osun of the Yoruba Orisha pantheon as a prototype of womanist praxis, Ogunyemi demonstrates that a certain degree of harmony and cooperation with nature is essential for the optimal functioning of society. Osun's roles as mother, mediator, independent businesswoman, and water deity illustrate the womanist penchant for working for social change and community well-being through diverse means simultaneously.

Second, Ogunyemi shows that food itself can be used as a means of social integration, diplomacy, and conflict resolution. In particular, she focuses on the role of palava sauce—a complex and tantalizing condiment comprised of numerous ingredients for which each person has her own “secret recipe”—in Nigerian social exchange. Quite literally, food can be used as a means of bringing people together who otherwise would not interact, for smoothing tensions when people disagree, and for facilitating celebration when victories of reconciliation have been achieved. Food is also known as a form of medicine among traditional healers, and the art of healing with food can be considered a lost art in industrialized society. In a society that requires healing on individual and collective levels, food itself can be considered a method for social change. This very accessible, ground-level, folk-oriented approach highlights the uniqueness of both womanism and ecowomanism. Furthermore, it intimates how veganism can serve as an expression of ecowomanist praxis.

### *My Story*

I began toying with the idea of vegetarianism in 1980 when a beloved adult mentor gave me *Kripalu Kitchen: A Natural Foods Cookbook & Nutritional Guide* for my fifteenth birthday. The Kripalu Center is a well-known center for yoga practice and holistic living located in the Berkshires of Massachusetts. My friend, a Baha'i, yoga enthusiast, and vegetarian, visited Kripalu and saw fit to share the spirit of her experience with me, in whom I'm sure she detected a kindred spirit, even at such a young age.

Coincidentally (as if there are any coincidences), around this same time my father had instructed me to begin learning how to cook. Rather than being a dictate of gender-role enforcement, my father's injunction reflected his desire for me to become a fully autonomous and self-sufficient person with many life skills. Being a bookish girl, my response was to go to the public library and start checking out cookbooks. To this day, I still remember the Dewey decimal number for cookbooks: 641. I noticed immediately, when left to my own devices, that I was drawn to “international” cookbooks, particularly cookbooks of the global South and East, where recipes were rich with spices and vegetables, and included, more often than not, rice (which had always been one of my favorite foods). At the time, I did not make the connection that the preponderance of vegetables, fruits, and grains in the global South diet was partially a function of global class dynamics and the legacy of colonialism, as well as the retention of a closer relationship to the earth and healthful eating practices in many of

the societies in question. I simply liked the food. As I tried different vegetarian recipes and presented them to my family of seven (of which I was the eldest child), I found myself drawn deeper and deeper into vegetarianism. I was the first to spring stir-fry on my family (complete with my own made-up honey-mustard sauce), as well as tofu (usually in the form of tofu-spinach quiche, given the quick craze of the early 1980s). These were greeted with great applause, as interesting departures from my mother's customary, albeit delicious way of cooking.

In 1982, as I headed off to Spelman College, where my mother and aunt had gone before me, I was presented with a gift from my mother. Somehow she'd found an institutional vegetarian cookbook that even had photos of Black cafeteria workers on the dust jacket. Proudly, I presented it to the chefs of the Alma Upshaw Dining Hall, who listened with at least feigned interest to my zealous spiel about vegetarianism. Unfortunately, I never witnessed the appearance of any of the book's offerings on the cafeteria line, and I began to wonder on what dimly lit shelf it might be gathering dust. My first attempt at vegetarian activism had come and gone, generating not even a ripple.

It wasn't much more than a year later when I was exposed to Alice Walker and womanism. Not only had my mother obtained a copy of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* through one of her many book clubs, but my human sexuality teacher at Spelman had us read and analyze Walker's *The Color Purple* for our final project. I was captivated by the womanist idea—indeed these, along with Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, were my entrée into feminism—as well as the diverse ideas about, and expressions of, sexuality and activism that I encountered in these texts. But these seeds lay dormant a long time before sprouting.

It is perhaps ironic (or not) that a few years into my college career I myself fell off the vegetarian bandwagon for a while. In the spring of my sophomore year, as a young nineteen-year-old, I became pregnant and got married in short order. The man in my life, a Morehouse brother from a squarely upper-middle-class family, was not a vegetarian. To make matters worse, his mother was a really good cook. Wanting to fulfill my good wife fantasies, I expanded my cooking repertoire to include a manner of meats, fowl, and fish, often learning to prepare these dishes using “famous” recipes that my family had never consumed: stuffed teriyaki steak, chicken divan, chicken kiev, broiled salmon with lemon and dill, and grouper tempura were among my specialties. I even served lamb with mint sauce more than once, not thinking twice about, or even being aware of, the conditions in which lambs are raised for consumption. This was well before I'd ever heard of veganism or animal rights, although I did purchase organic meats as soon as our local grocery store—Big Star, at the time—began to offer them.

Two years into this situation, aged twenty-one, I had a second child. It was my senior year when I got pregnant, the fall of my first year of grad school when I gave birth. I'd considered raising my children as vegetarians but didn't do so initially. It took a divorce after five years of marriage and my welcomed entry into single-parenthood to return to my preferred vegetarian diet. At this time, I usually cooked vegetarian food for myself and my kids, only occasionally caving into their desires for meat-based foods. But we were all big dairy eaters! I loved cheese (perhaps because my father is a Wisconsinite and his sister sent us big cheese baskets filled with cheddar and gouda every Christmas) and eggs (perhaps because my family ate scrambled eggs, often with ham and peppers, almost every Saturday morning, right along with oil-recipe biscuits). Also, for that lean period when I was a graduate student and single mom, WIC (the federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) provided us with lots of milk and eggs! When money was short, eggs or cereal and milk were a meal. Of course, now I realize the relationship between WIC and farming subsidies, but at the time it was a survival mechanism.

Nevertheless, I became radicalized around environmental issues during that single-parent



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