Veganism, virtue, and vigils

Human-animal interactions, vegan activism, and social meanings in a Johannesburg -based non-profit organisation

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandfather, Brian Perry, who never fully understood my interest in studying anthropology but nevertheless supported me wholeheartedly. Over many a cup of tea, I shared with him fieldwork stories, theories, ideas, and excerpts from my writing, and I will always fondly remember his curiosity and interest. His work ethic, practicality, and logical thinking always contributed much needed perspective. “At the end of the day, lovey, it’s about what makes you happy” - this is what makes me happy Grandad. Rest peacefully.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to Brendon Hopkinson, one of the most incredible people I have had the honour of meeting, knowing, and loving. You were with me throughout; from the very start of my master’s journey, you watched me grow and cheered me on as I did - you missed the final product by a month. In life you were my greatest teacher, so much of who I am is because of you; so much of me died with you. I know you are everything, everywhere. Shine on, you crazy diamond. I miss you, I love you.

Abstract

This dissertation centres on the South African chapter of an international vegan activism organisation that intends to "build a vegan world" by way of organising "vigils" outside slaughterhouses. At these vigils, activists bear witness to the animals destined for slaughter, in the hope that curious passersby might question their own relationship to animals-as-food. Drawing on field research – consisting of participant observation and interviews conducted over a period of 14 months – as well as textual analysis, I argue that this local iteration of vegan activism departs in important ways from the vision of its overarching international organisation. Through the life histories of the three key activists involved in these vigils, I explore how international animal rights activism is transposed in a South African context, and how this context may complicate the overarching organisation's aspirations of creating a vegan world. Furthermore, I illustrate how these three individual vegan activists pursue divergent but often rhyming projects to live meaningful, good lives. Despite their differences, the activists are unified in their attempts to find meaning, community and care, and "the good" amidst the insecurities and precarity, insecurity, and ambiguities of life under late capitalism.

Chapter 1
Introduction

> The slaughterhouse, although rather inconspicuous to passersby, is an assault on the senses for those who linger longer. To a passing motorist or pedestrian, the high walls topped with barbed wire and the chimneys lining the roofs render the facility identical to the countless other factories of this industrial area on the outskirts of middle-class suburbia. Passersby may not notice the putrid smells of pig excrement and vomit mingling with the smell of bacon, or the agonised shrieks and screams as animals are lowered via gondoliers into C02-filled chambers. They might not see the breadcrumb-trail of bright yellow puddles of animal bile that lead through the gates and into the innards of the slaughterhouse. They might not even see the highly visible trucks for what they are; they might take no note of the three layers of pink snouts desperately clamouring for air, for space. Perhaps, if they see anything at all, it is the canvas adverts of smiling cartoon pigs frolicking in a sunset that adorn the side-panels of the vehicles. To the person moving past this site, it may appear to be a site of business, of production – the product, irrelevant. To the activists of the Johannesburg Compassionate Advocacy Network[1], however, this is a place of mourning. For them, it is a site of death, a site of killing – a site of profound injustice.

The Johannesburg Compassionate Advocacy Network (JCAN) is a vegan activism organisation based in Johannesburg, South Africa. JCAN is one of 200 chapters worldwide that constitute one overarching organisation: the Compassionate Advocacy Network (CAN)[2]. The CAN frame themselves as a compassionate, love-based organisation focused on mobilising animal rights activists and creating a vegan world.

The JCAN first caught my attention in 2018. As a new and impassioned vegan, I felt an urgent moral obligation to become an activist. JCAN[3] was one of only a few vegan activism groups in Gauteng, and I found their approach particularly intriguing. Other activism groups focused on engagement with the public; edifying people through dialogue and displaying slaughterhouse footage. The animals, at the heart of this activism, were distant referents. What the JCAN offered was an opportunity for "bodily encounters" (Lockwood, 2018) with the very animals I felt compelled to help.

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[1] All organisations, institutions, and businesses associated with my interlocutors' identities have been pseudonymised. All interlocutors' names and personal details are also pseudonymised to protect their identities.

[2] My use of the term "CAN" in this dissertation refers to the collective global network that constitutes the organisation. The "overarching organisation" refers to the nonphysical body that oversees the operations of the organisation. There is no "main" or parent branch, however, CAN's first branch was founded in Canada.

[3] I will, throughout this dissertation, sometimes omit the definite article in both "the JCAN" and "the CAN". This is an intentional stylistic choice to facilitate readability.

The primary activism strategy of the CAN is to hold *vigils* outside of slaughterhouses. The word “vigil” has religious connotations; in certain Christian traditions, a vigil refers to a period of wakefulness and prayer the night before a festival or celebration. Historically, vigils have also referred to the practice of watching over and praying for the deathly ill. More recently, vigils have become a form of social or political activism, offering a quiet and reflective alternative to other forms of protest, such as marches or sit ins. The CAN’s vigils are best understood as the latter.

During these slaughterhouse vigils, the attending activists bear witness to the animals going to slaughter, defined by Purdy and Krajnc (2018: 48) as “a duty to be present at the darkest sites of injustice, to let others know of this injustice, and to do all one can to stop the injustice, as an individual and together with one’s community”. In practice, “bearing witness” is achieved by gathering activists outside an agreed-upon slaughterhouse to mourn the animals as they are taken inside.

The JCAN’s organised vigils took place at various slaughterhouses around Gauteng. During my fieldwork, however, the group focused its efforts exclusively on one particular slaughterhouse: a “pig processing facility”[4] in an industrial area on the fringes of Johannesburg. The reason for this focus differed based on who I asked: the vigil regulars told me that a consistent presence at a single slaughterhouse would likely have more of an impact than if their bimonthly vigils took place at a different site each time. One activist, Esme, only wanted to attend vigils held for pigs. The organiser responsible for the vigils, Helen, told me that the reason for their focus was that she had established a good working relationship with this slaughterhouse; the management of this slaughterhouse not only tolerated the JCAN, but actively accommodated them by instructing incoming livestock truck drivers to stop before entering the slaughterhouse, so that the activists could bear witness to the pigs.

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[4] The slaughterhouse described their operations in this way on their website and marketing communications.

While the stationary truck idled at the gate, the activists would approach the trailer chock-full of pigs, surrounding it. This was when their witness-bearing took place: some activists photographed and filmed the pigs inside; some activists whispered apologies, prayers, and goodbyes; some activists simply wept, moved by the profundity of being with these animals in their final moments. These precious seconds before the truck once again roared back to life were the quintessence of JCAN's vigils.

Once the truck had passed through the threshold, the activists would form what I have called a "funeral procession": Each activist wordlessly made their way to a gap in the walls, where an out-of-service gate covered in green shade netting allowed the activists a glimpse into the slaughterhouse complex. From here, they could see where the trucks – caked in pig excrement and urine – were hosed down and scrubbed, readied for their return to some distant farm where they would collect the next load of pigs. Through the gap, the activists could also see a large, windowless warehouse. This, they had surmised, was where the pigs were lowered into the gas chambers, to render them unconscious before they were slaughtered – a standard practice at this facility.

The activists, huddled together at the gate in complete silence, would then close their eyes and listen as the screams of the pigs rose and fell. The screaming could last well over an hour before finally stopping, and presumably the pigs had all been moved to the next phase of "processing". Some activists filmed this part of the vigil to capture the audio, to post on social media later in the day. Should an activist see one of their allies crying, they would offer support in the form of a gentle hand on the shoulder or a hug.

The funeral procession seemed torturous for the attendees, but they were undeterred: JCAN activists were committed to grieving the deaths that no-one else would, to staying with the pigs in their final moments, to witnessing while others looked away. For them, to bear witness was to strip away the layers of obscurity and obfuscation that allow for the normalisation of needless death on such an incomprehensible scale.

Between the sporadic arrivals of the "death trucks"[5], the activists engaged with passersby. The passersby consisted mostly of pedestrians who were traveling to or from their respective places of work within the industrial area. The activists would stand on the roadside brandishing large signs designed by CAN, printed locally. The signs displayed different phrases and images, conveying one essential message: *go vegan*. A group of people wielding placards with pictures of animals outside of a pig slaughterhouse was certainly a peculiar sight, and the activists often piqued the curiosity of passersby. When approached by members of the public, the activists would use the opportunity to explain why they were present at the slaughterhouse, which inevitably led to the activists attempting to convince curious passersby to adopt a vegan lifestyle. Edifying passersby on the horrors of animal agriculture was a secondary but essential component of vigils.

Passersby's reactions and responses to the JCAN were varied. Some people argued, some laughed in disbelief, and some even asked the activists if they were selling pigs. The JCAN activists, in accordance with CAN's guidelines, used "nonviolent communication" in sharing their message with passersby. Should a passerby ask for more information about veganism, the activists would celebrate this as a huge success: *We have planted a seed.*

Vigils were a sombre and emotionally draining affair. To decompress, some of the activists had made a habit of meeting for vegan pizza and a few glasses of wine at a nearby restaurant after vigils. Here, they connected with each other over that which estranged them from nonvegans in their social circle. Through the JCAN, the activists carved out a space of belonging for themselves. Despite the emotional intensity of vigils, a handful of regulars kept returning. Vigils, they felt, made a difference to the animals; vigils recommitted them, time and again, to veganism and animal rights; vigils allowed them to conceive of themselves as good and moral people in community with other good and moral people.

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[5] JCAN activists used this term to refer to livestock trucks.

While I have illustrated *how* vigils unfold, the question remains: *why vigils*? The JCAN was represented at other "activations" and events, such as market days, markets, or other campaigns, but the vigils constituted the "bread and butter" of their activism; their distinguishing feature. The vigils, as I have demonstrated, were composed of a variety of actions, interactions, actors, and audiences. The activists all believed that the most important facet of a vigil was *bearing witness*. The moment of bearing witness primarily involved the activists and the animal individuals inside the truck – the activists were present in the animals' last moments, recognising them as individuals who are capable of suffering. Bearing witness also involved passersby – the activists' public displays of grief in a space where mourning does not usually occur signals to passersby that there is something tragic afoot. It is the hopes of the activists that passersby will consider their own relations to the mourned animals.

Gillespie (2016:580) argues that bearing witness to animal suffering and intentionally mourning their lives has transformational potential: "Grieving the ungrieved signals to others that the subject in question ought to be grieved; it disrupts the dominant narratives that circulate to reinforce the notion that some lives and deaths simply matter less than others". Visibly mourning outside the slaughterhouse was thus an important part way for of the JCAN activists to convey their message to passersby – their intention is to implore passersby to reconsider their conceptualisation of animals-as-food. As Deckha (2019:33) notes, "[bearing witness] can be read as an ethical act that socially uncovers and signals an interruption of the commodified status of pigs as “food” or “commodities” — a move that works to question power and inequality — as well as individually affirm the intrinsic worth, agency, and mournability of the animals themselves”.

Another crucial component of bearing witness is in the activists’ ability to draw the public’s attention to the slaughterhouse. The animals’ passage from a living creature to packaged flesh is largely obscured from the public. Within industrialised animal agriculture, the first time that the animals encounter the public is on their journey between farm and slaughterhouse. On the either side of this journey, the animals’ lives and deaths are kept discrete and out of sight.

Turner’s (1969) classic concept of liminality provides an interesting lens through which to view the animals’ journey to the slaughterhouse. Turner, in developing Van Gennep’s concept of liminality, described the “liminal” phase of a ritual whereby ritual participants are no longer bound to structures that existed pre-ritual but are not yet bound to structures that will emerge post-ritual – liminality is distinctly in-between. Turner argued that liminality not only highlighted the importance of in-between periods but was relevant in understanding “the human reactions to liminal experiences: the way liminality shaped personality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience" (Thomassen, 2009).

The animals’ transportation from farm to slaughterhouse could be framed as liminal; the animals are between life and death. Within ritual contexts, liminal entities and moments are subject to ritual authority and control to attempt to limit the potency of their ambiguous and unsettling nature. Within the context of the JCAN vigils, the ritual here is the transformation of “animal” into “meat”. The truck journey between farm and slaughterhouse is, of course, subject to control; however, the journey is vulnerable and precarious – animals could escape, or the truck could encounter problems, which could disrupt the ritual transformation of animal into meat. Through bearing witness to this liminality, JCAN activists believe themselves to disrupt the normalised ritual: Physically, the truck is asked to stop for the activists to mourn the animals. Symbolically, the JCAN draw attention to a ritual transformation that aspires to be discrete, invisible, and unremarkable; industrialised commercial slaughter is not meant to be a public spectacle, nor is it meant to be mourned.

In bearing witness, the JCAN seize the moment that living animals are brought into the public arena; an "ordinary – yet extraordinary – encounter" (Pick, 2011). As Staples and Klein (2017:205) note, "…it is precisely the ability of industrialised livestock farming and slaughter to distance consumers from consumed, which may facilitate the mass consumption of meat in contemporary societies". JCAN activists hope that by closing the physical, social, and linguistic distance between animal and meat, the normalisation of animal consumption will be questioned, and ideally, abolished. Capitalising on this vulnerable moment is arguably a powerful tool in animal activism, as O'Sullivan and Gelber (2021:30) note: "[bearing witness] is an effective means of publicising animal protection issues without the need for trespass, therefore circumventing ag-gag laws", and further claim that "the animal protection movement is robust and adaptive".

Carol J. Adams, a prominent feminist-vegetarian scholar, argues that meat is processed to the point that consumers cannot recognise the animal which allows consumers to continue eating meat without feeling guilt or conflict (1990). Adams (1990:13) refers to this distortion of animal into meat as the "absent referent", stating that "the function of the absent referent is to keep our "meat" separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal". The JCAN's presence at the slaughterhouse draws attention to absent referent through bearing witness. Between the animal and the meat, there is a moment of potent liminality, which JCAN activists leverage.

(In)visibility

In his powerful book, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (2011), Pachirat argues that slaughterhouses are "hidden in plain sight" – through careful mechanisms of concealment and distance, "morally and physically repugnant practices" (p. 11) are allowed to persist. Pachirat's argument is drawn from ethnographic evidence collected while he was employed at slaughterhouses in America – employment that he secured under false presences by concealing his positionality as a researcher.

Pachirat (2011) argues that slaughterhouses operate by creating barriers that prevent the public from seeing how animals-as-food are slaughtered. The barriers are not only physical, says Pachirat, but social, linguistic, and methodological, enabling "industrialised killing" to persist unquestioned. The slaughterhouse and its operations thus serve as a commentary on the relationship between sight and power; what Pachirat calls the politics of sight. Pachirat argues that when these barriers of concealment are breached, radical social and political change is possible.

Sight is an important component of JCAN's activism – one needs only consider the terms *vigil* and bearing *witness.* A shared goal of all activists is *visibility* – the activists *see* the animals through bearing witness, the public *sees* the activists (which, the activists hope, will draw their attention to the animals), and through footage, broader online audiences *see* the animals, too. In bringing to light what is "hidden in plain sight", the JCAN activists are arguably "breaching the zones of confinement and rendering the repugnant visible" (Pachirat, 2011, p. 245).

Despite the supposed "transformative potential" of exposing hidden practices, the JCAN's activism did not seem to be achieving any such transformations. How might the politics of sight be rendered ineffective if placed in a context whereby animal slaughter is not concealed? What if the "morally repugnant" practices that the JCAN tried to expose were not considered morally repugnant, at all?

Made famous by Paul McCartney, the adage "if slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian" (2010) was an oft cited verse in JCAN activists' vocabulary. However, when interacting with passersby at vigils, the activists found this notion was challenged. South Africa's sociocultural landscape implies diverse configurations with regards to what constitutes as "moral", especially in relation to animals. The CAN's strategy and structure hinges entirely on the belief that every person would find animal slaughter deplorable, disgusting, or outrageous.

To understand the assumptions about animal slaughter being morally corrupt, I turn to Reed (2014), who attempts to pinpoint when in Western history "meat" became separate from "animal". Reed traces this distinction to the late Middle Ages, however, the concealment of animal slaughter only emerged in European societies in the nineteenth century. It was during this period, against the backdrop of industrialisation, that meat became more accessible to all classes within society, as opposed to a luxury enjoyed by the elite. Moreover, the nineteenth century saw growing concerns over hygiene and sanitation. Subsequently, practices that saw animals slaughtered in public view disappeared.

Another factor that contributed to this separation was a cultural shift away from "animalistic" behaviour – including animal slaughter – as it increasingly became associated with violence. Notions of what constituted as "civilised", emerging from the Enlightenment, further informed the concealment of animal slaughter from the public gaze. This further perpetuated the idea that animal slaughter was violent, unclean, and "primitive". Reed draws our attention to how these ideas fell part of larger Western colonial ideologies:

> the parallel dichotomies of "human"/"animal" and "primitive man"/"civilized man" could be mapped onto multiple spatial and temporal axes: they could be used to

> classify synchronic diversity within and between modern societies (e.g., elites vs. peasants; native-born citizens vs. immigrants; Christians vs. non-Christians; "the West" vs. "the rest"), but also to mark the defining diachronic poles in the purportedly teleological trajectory of human history towards the present […] (2014, p. 120).

The ghosts of these dichotomies are still present today, and within a South African context we can see how this unfolds in relation to animals, foodways, race, and class.

Animals in anthropology

The history of anthropology's engagement with animals is rich and long. For a more detailed review of this literature, see White and Candea (2018) and Shanklin (1985). Per White and Candea's account, the history of animals in anthropology can broadly be mapped onto two paths: one concerned with the functional use of animals (economic, political) and the other concerned with the conceptual use of animals (symbolic, mythic). The former strand of anthropology sought to understand the materiality of animals in human social life, framing animals primarily through their pragmatic uses (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Malinowski 1925; Radcliffe-Brown 1952). In contrast, the likes of Levi-Strauss (1963), Douglas (1966) and Geertz (1973) challenged thinking of animals in strictly utilitarian ways, by demonstrating their symbolic importance.

Around the advent of the twenty-first century, anthropology took a new direction, proposing a third way in the discipline's long engagement with animals: Seeing animals as participative agents in world-making. As Haraway notes about canine companions, "[d]ogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with. They are here to live with" (2003, p. 3). Haraway's quote develops Levi-Strauss's by now trite observation that animals "are good to think" with (1963, p. 89). This so-called "animal turn" in the social sciences called for reconceptualising the presupposed distinction between the categories of "human" and "animal". Previously, animals in the social sciences were relegated to the periphery, cast as objects with either utilitarian or symbolic value to humans. The animal turn, then, sought to frame animals as active subjects embroiled in human social lives.

The animal turn saw the emergence of multispecies ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). Multispecies ethnographers across the social sciences grew curious about how cultural, economic, and political forces affected and were affected by nonhuman organisms. Multispecies ethnography decentres the human and takes as its starting point the entanglement of human and nonhuman lives.

A local example to demonstrate the epistemological dimensions of the animal turn can be found in Sandra Swart's book, *The Lion's Historian: Africa's Animal Past* (2023) which provides a multispecies retelling of animals' roles in the lives of humans throughout African history. In doing so, Swart illustrates how humans and animals are co-constitutive of each other's histories. Although not strictly anthropological, this historical account demonstrates the animal turn in the social sciences. Multispecies ethnography encourages us to reconsider the boundaries that define species, thus deconstructing the long-standing dichotomies of human versus nature that emerged from colonial thought. The animal turn urges us to question the hierarchical structures that have positioned humans above nature.

Animals-as-food

Multispecies ethnography also brings to light the entanglements of nonhuman organisms in contemporary life. One of the most prominent ways that nonhuman organisms are entangled in human life is through our consumption of them, and perhaps the most poignant configuration of this entanglement is animals-as-food. More than any other kind of food, meat and the consumption thereof provides insight into the social, economic, symbolic, religious, and political lives of humans throughout history.

Staples and Klein (2017) point to how ambiguities surrounding animals-as-food are shaped by the rapid industrialisation and globalisation of the late capitalist moment. The ambiguities around meat in the contemporary age arise from ethical, environmental, and health concerns – Staples and Klein point to the "horse meat scandal" that transpired in the UK in 2013 to demonstrate their point: it was discovered that processed meats, such as mince, contained traces of horse meat, which raised consumer's concerns about the inconspicuous production of their (animals-as) food. This is largely enabled because of the increased distance between consumer and consumed; physically, linguistically, and methodologically, as demonstrated by Pachirat (2011). The disgust expressed by consumers also highlights the existence of culturally informed taboos surrounding which animals are edible and which are not – Staples and Klein (2017:196) use this to evidence the importance of maintaining "anthropological notions of culture" that are often dismissed in post-humanist scholarship.

Another crucial fact raised by Staples and Klein is the various ways the ambiguities about animals-as-food are resolved. Despite a growing interest in veganism and vegetarianism internationally, meat consumption is on the rise too. Staples and Klein demonstrate that in some cases, *closing* the physical, linguistic, and methodological distance between consumer and consumed eases concerns pertaining to animal and ecological welfare and human wellbeing.

Meat in South Africa

Staples and Klein's approach combines multispecies perspectives as well as more classic notions of culture – a useful framework to make sense of the complex human-animal entanglements brought to light by JCAN. Because JCAN's activism specifically addresses conceptualisations of animals-as-food, I took this to be my starting point in reviewing the extensive literature in the social sciences that investigates human-animal relations. Yates-Doerr (2015) argues that understandings of food – in this case, meat – need to be grasped as emerging from a particular situation. In this way, while it is useful to draw on international understandings of the relationship between humans and animals-as-food, the context – and the histories, meanings, worldviews, and positionalities therein – is of utmost importance.

Animals-as-food feature heavily in the desired diets and cuisines of many South Africans. South Africa's own Heritage Day has earned the colloquial nickname of "*braai*[6] day" and our national dish is the Cape Malay *bobotie*, a casserole made from curried minced meat. This suggests a strong link between animals-as-food and national identity. Across South Africa's diverse sociocultural landscape, events of all kinds – weddings, birthdays, funerals, rituals, religious festivities – are accentuated by the sharing (and sometimes ritual slaughter) of animals-as-food. Meat is evidently woven into the sociocultural fabric of South Africa.

Hylton White (2011:105) demonstrates how animals' "entanglements in human affairs become vectors for the constitution - and therefore the imagination -of different social ties" by illustrating how households in rural KwaZulu-Natal differentiate between "chickens of whiteness" and "chickens of Zuluness". Chickens of whiteness are typically raised under highly industrialised conditions, are of unvaryingly dull colouring, and are plump and lazy. While chickens of whiteness are thought to be tasty, they induce lethargy in those who eat them. Chickens of Zuluness, on the other hand, are thought to be reminiscent of the homestead; they are bold and intelligent; they strengthen and excite the bodies of those who eat them.

White (2011) shows how chickens of whiteness are a product of modernity but are also representative of it – they travel straight from "market to mouth"; their pre-packaged bodies enter the household quickly and are eaten quickly. Chickens of Zuluness reflect traditional values and enter the household through social "mediations and exchanges" (2011, 107), and the preparation and consumption of their bodies reinforces kinship hierarchies and incorporates spiritual practices. More broadly, the distinctions between the types of chickens mirror anxieties experienced by the households in KZN over the rapid onset of modernity and the shifting tides of tradition.

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[6] Loosely translated from Afrikaans, *braai* refers to a barbeque: both the act and manner of cooking meat on a grill, as well as to a social gathering that centres around this act of cooking. Despite *braai*'s Afrikaans origins, braais are widely enjoyed across linguistic and cultural groups in South Africa.

White (2011:105) highlights how living and dead chickens are entangled into the social, economic, spiritual, physiological fabrics of human lives; "relations with animals function not as indices of given cultural differences, but rather as social practices aspiring to create particular forms of differentiation". Here is one configuration of how animals-as-food might find themselves in the social imaginations of South Africans.

Daya (2022:669) points out that in most international journals, foodways in Africa – if written about at all – are viewed "primarily through a frame of deficiency". One in five South African households are food insecure, thus the label of "deficiency" is an unfortunate and urgent reality (Cowling 2023, Mtintsilana 2023). Because South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world, it goes without saying that economic factors shape South African foodways significantly (Alao, et al., 2018).

In his research on "foodways of the poor", Kroll (2016) demonstrates the multidirectional flow of influence between actors in food value-chains, arguing that through food, people living in poverty are, despite their restricted options, nonetheless agentive. This sheds light on "how poverty expresses itself in foodways, and how foodways are used to respond to conditions of poverty, not only by making rational choices to maximise value, but also by cultivating social networks and transitioning within those networks from vulnerable, exploited positions to positions of greater wealth, power and influence" (2016, p. 9). Kroll's argument demonstrates the nuances and multidirectional forces of influence within spaces where such dynamics are often overlooked, or simply labelled as "deficient".

Moreover, Kroll illustrates the symbolic power of foodways: where people purchase food, what they buy, and how they prepare and consume it are all ways in which people can signify wealth, status, belonging, and identity. Of course, this is not a new concept – scholars in food anthropology have investigated topics like the relationship between foodways and factors like gender (Counihan, 1999), identity (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002), race (Daya, 2022), and class (Bourdieu 1979, Chevalier 2015).

Quantitative data in Kroll's (2016:16) work reflects "conspicuously high meat consumption" amongst poor South Africans. He argues that economic and nutritional explanations for this are insufficient; foods like grains, legumes, and eggs provide affordable and protein-rich alternatives to meat, and the relative meat-heaviness of impoverished South African's diets therefore indicates the need for an emic understanding. For Kroll (2016), a more plausible explanation is found in sociocultural understandings of meat in South Africa: meat, in this context, is associated with upward mobility, status, and wealth. This socially and culturally constituted demand for affordable meats ripples up the food value chain, which meets this demand through highly industrialised methods of animal agriculture, with significant implications for the economic, political, and environmental context in which the value-chain is situated. Here we see a local example of how animals-as-food become entangled in human social, political, and economic lives. Staples and Klein (2017:201) stress the importance of attending "to the minutiae of everyday consumer practices and to the wider– often international– networks in which those practices are located, recognising the subtle (and not so subtle) ways the one influences the other".

Conspicuous consumption of animals-as-food as a signifier of upward social mobility needs to be understood within a specifically South African context. Global trends suggest that meat is losing its significance as a symbol of wealth elsewhere. In the Global North, higher classes are leaning towards more plant-based ways of eating, reflecting concerns for the environment or animal welfare (Yount-André & Zembe, 2023).

Yount-André and Zembe (2023) note that this trend is complicated in South Africa, especially for Black working-class South Africans. Under the Apartheid regime, and amidst a period of rapid globalisation of food systems and foodways, Black South Africans were "excluded from forms of consumption emblematic of global modernity". Such "forms of modernity" included the growing association of meat with wealth, as well as access to shopping malls and fast-food outlets (Chevalier, 2015). Considering this historical context, then, "[f]or people of colour – even those considered middle class – efforts to position oneself through meat eating often hinge upon the desire to distance oneself from signs of abject poverty and the humiliation endured during apartheid" (Yount-André & Zembe, 2023).

Interestingly, Daya (2022:974) found her Black respondents to relate meat to Black identity, whereas her white respondents did not link meat consumption to their racial identity: "in White narratives about meat, Whiteness itself is pretty much invisible". This, Daya argues, is because whiteness itself is inherently constructed as "invisible" – it is taken to be the norm, the standard, the unexceptional. In reviewing the literature, it seems white South African foodways are understudied.

One notable exception among the invisibility of white foodways is veganism and vegetarianism, which have come to be associated with whiteness[7]. We have already seen how animals-as-food co-constitute identity and class among many Black South Africans. What of those foodways where animals-as-food are absent entirely? Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2020:9) states that "…animal advocacy already tends to be understood as a white topic in the South African context…”. This serves as another example of various configurations of relations with animals in South Africa.

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[7] This is not to say that veganism and vegetarianism are inherently "white" practices – both of these lifestyles have long been practiced in Buddhist and Hindu religious traditions – but rather to acknowledge the demographic realities of the contemporary "vegan community" in South Africa.

Animal advocacy in South Africa

Veganism is an ideology that challenges all the aforementioned configurations of animals-as-food. For vegan animal rights activists, including my interlocutors, veganism extends beyond the personal and into the political. Individual abstinence from animal products is insufficient to stop the current system of “industrialised killing”. It is through activism that one has the potential to change the behaviours of a collective of individuals and thus create meaningful social transformation. The JCAN’s version of veganism is underpinned largely by Western philosophies and thought. How, then, does such a philosophy fit into South Africa’s vast collection of philosophies pertaining to animals?

To see CAN’s vision of creating a vegan world realised, JCAN would surely first have to create a vegan South Africa. Perhaps one of the most glaring obstacles in achieving this goal is not to be found in the future of JCAN’s activism, but in their failure to incorporate or acknowledge the past. Human-animal entanglements take many forms within South Africa’s diverse sociocultural landscape. In South African mainstream media, it is all too common to see how animals supersede their use as symbols or sustenance. Conflicts frequently emerge between groups of people about animal matters – the culling of wildlife (Bamford, 2016), ritual slaughtering of animals in public places (Mjo, 2018), Diwali fireworks disturbing pets and wildlife (Nefdt, 2024), hunting (Stoddard, 2022) – to point to but a few examples of the scale and depth of animals’ entanglements in the social webs of South Africa.

Thus far, I have highlighted the kind of activism done by the JCAN, as well as provided insight into the contemporary understandings of animals-as-food and foodways in a South African context. The following section concerns the point where these meet: the intersection of global vegan activism, largely underpinned by Western ideologies, and a South African context, in which animals-as-food are deeply imbedded. At the heart of it is animals – drawing on multispecies approaches to anthropology, one can see how the contestation that arises from conflicts of interests about animals indicates how, as White (2011:105) observes, animals indeed become “vectors for the constitution - and therefore the imagination -of different social ties”.

Veganism in this context is not understood to be merely a diet that can exist in harmony with the diverse array of foodways in South Africa – veganism inherently challenges existing foodways in South Africa, calling for a complete reconceptualization of animals-as-food (and, in thinking with other scholars of the animal turn, contests human’s assumptive dominion over animals). As the previous section has demonstrated, ‘food’ is not limited to consumable matter – rather, food is an expression of belonging and identity, a negotiator of social and economic capital, a reflection of memory, taste, desire, culture. Vegan activism demands a reconsideration of the sociocultural structures and that create and are created by animals-as-food.

The JCAN’s ideological position is not the first instance where we can see the collision of beliefs arising from veganism in a South African context. Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2020) highlights a local incident that reveals the socially disruptive potential of veganism in South Africa. In 2015, the University of Cape Town was in the throes of the “Rhodes Must Fall” movement: students and staff alike protested the perseveration and inclusion of colonialist ideologies within South African universities and called to decolonise higher education in the country (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2020).

Amidst this upheaval, some humanities faculty called to serve exclusively meat-free meals at future faculty events. The faculty put forward the proposition to address growing concerns for animal welfare and the environment. The meat-free proposal was met with resistance: the timing of the proposal indicated a lack of support for the "Rhodes Must Fall" movement and the greater cause of decolonisation, subsequently leading to the opposing faculty labelling the proposal as racist. The resistant members of faculty stated that the proponents of the meat-free move did not contextualise their proposal within broader African sociocultural understandings and meanings of animals-as-food. Opposing faculty critiqued the proposal for its blatant disregard for the racialised history of animal justice in South Africa, pointing to the fact that under colonial rule and later, the Apartheid regime, animal lives were prioritised over Black lives. The tension arising from the meat-free menu proposal reflects much deeper tensions over race and animals within a South African context.

Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2020) points to how the entanglements of animals and race in South Africa emerged from the 19th century. Under colonial rule, Black South Africans were forcibly removed from their land in order to create spaces of "conservation", to be engaged with and enjoyed by whites only (McDonald 2002, Green 2020). Khan (2002) argues that this was due to the colonial mentality that assumed that Black people were "uncivilised" and dependent on white depended on white colonisers to civilise them. This thinking manifested itself into white perceptions of how Black people treat animals and the environment (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2020). To white colonial imaginations, Black people became synonymous with environmental destruction and animal abuse – white people were seen as protectors of the environment and wildlife. White stewardship over nature became a further justification for white authority and belonging in South Africa. Black people were thus excluded from conservation because of an imagined lack of knowledge or expertise to care for animals or the environment (ibid.).

To further demonstrate the racialised history of animals in a local context, Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2020) highlights dogs' role in defending and protecting white power and supremacy under Apartheid. White policemen used dogs to control and intimidate Black people. Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2020:6) also points to how dogs were trained to attack Black insurgents. Furthermore, dogs were used to defend and protect white property from the imagined threat of Black invasion (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2020, Van Sittert & Swart 2007). Local white authorities prohibited Black people from owning dogs because it was thought that Black people would allow their dogs to disrupt eco-systems, either through hunting wildlife or killing white-owned livestock (Van Sittert & Swart, 2007). It is no wonder that to Black South Africans, dogs became symbols of white dominion and control.

The meat-free proposal suggested by UCT faculty serves as one example of animals' complicated entanglements in South Africa's sociocultural landscape today. Conflicting ideas about animal care, animals-as-food, and human-animal relations in South Africa reveal persistent divisions of South African society along racial lines, and animals, as White (2011:105) notes, are "of the essence". Spiegel (2020) highlights another example of the tensities arising from the intersections of race, culture, and animals in a South African context. In December 2018, protesters took to Cape Town's upmarket Clifton Fourth Beach to ritually slaughter a sheep. The protesters performed the ritual in response to a situation whereby Black beachgoers were excluded from the beach by a private security company[8]. The event brought light to the presence of Apartheid-era discrimination and lingering colonial sentiments in South Africa. The protesters sought to call upon their ancestors to cleanse the beach – and the country – of racism, as well as to reclaim a space that they had been historically excluded from.

The situation sparked outrage amongst white South Africans and caused a visible polarisation of opinions on race and the social meanings of animals. White residents, commentators, and social media users decried the slaughter as cruel and gruesome, while many

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[8] Spatial constraints do not allow for the detailed retelling of the series of events, however, there have been many accounts of it: (Mjo 2018, Spiegel 2020, Tayob 2022).

Black South Africans argued that the protesters were exercising their constitutional rights to perform cultural rituals. In the article, Spiegel's intention is to demonstrate essentialist understandings of class and race in contemporary South Africa, however, in illustrating the essentialist understandings and dialogues that transpired amongst commentators, one thing becomes clear: animals exist in varied and sometimes conflicting ways in the South African social imagination. Their bodies, symbolic meaning, ritual purpose, flesh, morality, and lives shape and are shaped by human social life; animals are participative agents in our world-making.

Green is the new white

Koot, Büscher, and Thakholi's (2024) exploration of racial tensions within a wildlife conservancy in Hoedspruit, South Africa, reveal that forms of the ideologies that emerged from colonisation and Apartheid still linger on today (2024). Because of Black people's historical exclusion from conservation as well as economic disenfranchisement under South Africa's oppressive regimes, much of the land used for conservation remains under white ownership. As Koot, Büscher, and Thakholi (2024) illustrate, Hoedspruit remained segregated along racial and class lines. White landowners live in protected estates and within conservancies, while Black people – on whose labour white people depend – live in informal settlements on the periphery of these protected areas. Proposed development projects to improve the lifestyles of Hoedspruit's working class, such as affordable housing and shopping malls, are met with resistance by white landowners on the basis that this was not in the best interests of conservation efforts. The reproduction of racial inequalities under the pretences of conservation is what Koot, Büscher, and Thakholi (2024) dub "the new green apartheid".

Similarly, Green (2020) highlights the "unbearable whiteness of green" in reference to contemporary conservation spaces in South Africa. In *Rock | Water | Life,* Green (2020) attempts to highlight the relations between human and nature, dissolving the illusion that there is a separation at all, instead framing “humans” and “nature” as inherently belonging to the same “socio-ecological systems”. In doing so, Green (2020) reveals how environmentalism in South Africa has long been informed by Western “natural” sciences, which features prominently in the dark past of colonialism. South Africa’s current environmentalism movement leans heavily on Science and dismisses local ways of knowing and being with nature, which again reproduces exclusion. Using the justification of Science, nature remains a separate, controllable, commodifiable entity. Green (2020) calls for a decolonial reconceptualization – not a complete erasure of Science, but rather an opportunity for reflexivity over Science’s authoritarianism, an acknowledgement of historical injustices, and engagement and collaboration with other ways of knowing.

The arguments made in this section demonstrate how conservation spaces in South Africa today reproduce Apartheid-era hierarchies that position white people as “the expert, the judge, the martyr” (Green, 2020). Similarly, in her book, *The Nature of Whiteness: Race, Animals and Nation in Zimbabwe*, Yuka Suzuki (2017) explores the ways in which white Zimbabwean farmers frame themselves to be knowledgeable conservationists in order to reclaim belonging amidst increasing uncertainty and insecurity in post-independence Zimbabwe. Suzuki found that within post-independence Zimbabwe, wealth and land disproportionately remained in the realms of whites, despite their minority status. As Suzuki (2017) demonstrates, white people constructed themselves as stewards of nature, thus their expertise and knowledge justified the blatant inequality that benefited them. Nature became an apolitical and ahistorical way for white Zimbabweans to construct themselves as moral people acting in the best interests of the country, therefore white Zimbabweans’ reinvented identities did not necessitate the erasure of stubborn colonial ideas about race and hierarchy.

Moreover, Suzuki (2017:156) argues that “Whiteness, when paired with nature, erases the traces of its own fashioning”. To the white mind, nature is conceived of as being pure, moral, and innocent. Similarly, white people's constructed closeness with nature frames whiteness itself becomes associated with pure, moral, and innocent. Thus, "nature and whiteness reproduce each other in meaning and power; they lend each other authority while rendering the process itself invisible" (ibid.).

Similarly, within the South African context, we see repeatedly how in constructing themselves as ecologically concerned citizens, white people claim belonging in post-Apartheid South Africa – an era fraught with white anxieties and uncertainty that accompanies loss of political power and social capital. In positioning themselves as knowledgeable, compassionate, and concerned individuals and communities, white people weave themselves into the fabric of the nation – the environment needs them, the animals need them, the nature-country needs them.

This, of course, is done so apolitically – to involve politics would be to reveal uncomfortable truths about white belonging and power in post-colonial South Africa. As the Comaroffs (2001) demonstrate in their analysis of the emerging fears of alien species wreaking havoc on "indigenous" floral ecosystems, nature becomes a vehicle through which to express sociopolitical concerns without explicitly addressing the crux of such concerns. Thus, environmental allegories – as with the Comaroff's (2001:639) example of alien plant species corrupting native order – "transform and represent diffuse political terrors as natural facts".

The JCAN's endeavour to create a vegan world falls under the broad umbrella of environmental conservation. The JCAN's ideological position sees all vegan-adjacent causes as being interlinked – while animal rights are their primary focus, the JCAN views veganism as a necessary implement to address the climate crisis as well. In fact, most of my vegan activist interlocutors cited concern for the environment as an important – albeit secondary – matter of concern that subsequently drove them into activism. Additionally, the literature situating the

JCAN within broader discourses of conservation becomes especially relevant when one considers the JCAN's demographics: white, middle-class South Africans constituted the overwhelming majority.

The JCAN, like other white conservation efforts in South Africa, is a vessel through which white activists grapple with their own belonging in post-Apartheid South Africa. Framed as an apolitical organisation, the JCAN's activism erases animals' complex entanglements throughout South Africa's sociopolitical history. Given the pervasive role of the animal-as-food among various sociocultural configurations in South Africa, veganism is a particularly provocative ideology. As Suzuki (2017:142) notes, "animal welfare becomes a site of seemingly apolitical intervention, or a safe zone from which other groups' practices can be criticized".

What this suggests is that veganism is not a "one size fits all" due to animals' inextricable and varied entanglements in human social meanings, relationships, and identity – of course, this brings into question the supposed universality of veganism.

A case for the extended case: methodology

My fieldwork took place between February 2022 and April 2023. Employing the extended case study method, I spent fourteen months between February 2022 and April 2023 conducting my fieldwork. As is typical of the extended case study method, I conducted participant observation in the various settings – vigils, restaurants, markets, as well as my interlocutors' businesses, sanctuaries, and homes – that constituted their vegan lives. The extended case method is most valuable in investigating the relations between the personal, lived experiences of people and the broader economic, social, and political forces within a particular context. Given that the scope of this dissertation investigates a global movement transplanted into a South African context, it seemed most fitting to employ the extended case study method.

As Burawoy (1998:13) aptly notes, "context is not noise disguising reality but reality itself". In order to understand both the contexts and realities of my informants, I collected each of their life histories (in addition to interviews, conversations, and dialogue). Life histories, in this case, acted as connective tissue, linking my ethnographic data to larger forces – social, political, economic, cultural, historical. Furthermore, life histories provided insight in to how my participants understood themselves in relation to these forces – which proved to be most useful within the context of this dissertation.

The life history interviews started once I felt that I had established rapport with my interlocutors, usually when I was invited to "hang out" outside of vigils, or invited to events unrelated to JCAN, or invited to my interlocutors' homes. Once my interlocutors consented to sharing their life histories and having the interviews recorded, I would record the interviews on my cell phone. The interviews – semi-structured and conversational – were later transcribed and securely stored on my laptop. Each interview lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, and I conducted at least three interviews with each participant.

When the life history interviews took place, I allowed my participants the opportunity to start at a point of their choosing, as it was my intention to capture my participants' worldviews and perspectives. This was effective in establishing how my interlocutors frame their lives chronologically and according to standout events. All three of the primary participants centred the initial telling of their stories around their transitions to veganism. I read this to mean that veganism was central to how they understood and constructed themselves in relation to the world. Perhaps, a more cynical reading of this phenomenon would simply be that my participants told me what they assumed I wanted to hear. Regardless, given the scope of this dissertation and the emergent ways animals were entangled in each of my interlocutors' lives, their vegan-centred narrations of their lives proved to be most enlightening.

Making use of dynamic informed consent, which fits well with the extended case methods' ongoing dialogue with interlocutors, my participants were continuously informed and engaged with my use of the data that was collected. Because of the sensitive nature of the topics discussed herein, I have used pseudonyms for all of my participants and tangential organisations so as to protect their identities. I relied on the American Anthropological Association's (2012) ethical guidelines, as well as those outlined by Anthropology Southern Africa's ethical guidelines (2004).

I was able to identify the key informants soon after commencing my fieldwork. Three activists – Helen, Louis, and Esme – were central to the organisation and structure of the group. These "key three" attended every vigil, frequently engaged on the WhatsApp group chat, and were integral to the decision-making of the group. Other activists attended on a more sporadic basis, however, Helen, Louis, and Esme's voices emerged as the most prominent.

Helen was a 57-year-old white woman from Johannesburg. At the time of writing, she had been vegan for five years and she was a prominent member of the vegan activism community in Johannesburg. Helen founded the Johannesburg chapter of CAN in 2018 after being inspired by the activism done by the international chapters. The overarching organisation had guidelines that were to be adhered to by the global chapters. The guidelines also included suggestions regarding organisational structure for every chapter – for the efficient running of the group, CAN recommended delegating roles such as organiser, photographer, social media manager, fundraiser, recruiter, public relations representative, among others. As we will learn, the JCAN's membership was not large enough to fulfil all these roles; as such, Helen took most of these on herself. As the official organiser, she held an intermediary role between many different actors: the activists, the overarching organisation, the slaughterhouse, members of the public (including online). Chapter 2 takes a closer look at Helen's positionality, not only in the JCAN, but more broadly as a wealthy white woman in South Africa.

Louis, who we will come to know in Chapter 3, is a white man in his seventies, was another prominent activist of the JCAN. Louis owned an antique shop with his partner, Eric, and owned a vegan deli to provide the vegan community on the East Rand of Johannesburg with gourmet vegan products. Louis had been vegan for over ten years and his passion and dedication to the JCAN was abundantly evident, however, as we will see, his zeal was not wholly harmless.

The final member of the "key three" was Esme, a white Zimbabwean (she referred to herself as Rhodesian) who had been living in South Africa for over 40 years. Esme owned a pig sanctuary on the outskirts of Pretoria, and her knowledge and understanding of pigs proved to be a useful addition to the JCAN's activism artillery. Esme was reclusive and far preferred the company of porcine individuals than people. Tracing her excentric life history, chapter 2 demonstrates the complex interchange between belonging, race, and animals and how Esme negotiates these entanglements within post-Apartheid South Africa.

Although Louis and Esme did not hold any official title in the JCAN's organisational structure, the two were integral to the group. Louis and Esme formed a strong friendship, bonding over a commitment to defending the lives of animals. At times, Louis and Esme disagreed with Helen's leadership and subsequently took matters into their own hands by organising vigils on their own accord or making additions and changes to the vigils without Helen's permission. As we shall see, the ideas and approaches of the key three were often in conflict. The group portrayed a relatively unified front, however, looking beyond the surface revealed tensions and clashes of ideologies, complicating the group's efficacy.

Through these three life histories, I showcase the disparate, sometimes problematic, and often unexpected ways a global vegan activist movement has found purchase in the South African context. I argue that, amidst the complexity, variation, and heated contestations that characterise human-animal relations in this country, JCAN's attempts to transpose CAN's ostensibly "apolitical" principles and methods are both fraught and flawed. Yet, while I point to the troubled (and troubling) aspects of their endeavours, I also illustrate how these three individuals pursue divergent but often rhyming projects to live meaningful, good lives. Despite their differences, the activists are unified in their attempts to find community and care amidst the insecurities and ambiguities of life under late capitalism.

Chapter 2

Helen: Collecting causes, consuming identities

In the summer of 2023, Helen invited me to one of her and her husband's holiday homes – a property located around 2 hours' drive away from Johannesburg, which they'd dubbed Willow Bay. Helen wished to take me on a tour of the food forest she had established there, having told me about it often and with great enthusiasm throughout the course of my fieldwork.

Arriving at their home, I was struck by the sheer size of the property: A long driveway lined with towering, abstract metal sculptures led me to a grand, ultra-modern home overlooking the sparkling waters of the marina. At the end of the driveway, Helen waited for me, wearing her signature look: red lipstick, large sunglasses, and a warm smile. Upon opening the car door, I was greeted by four enthusiastic basset hounds, all eagerly clamouring to get inside the vehicle. Helen, once the dogs had settled down, welcomed me with a hug. She led me over a decorative pond, complete with a little wooden bridge and a trickling fountain, to the hulking double-doored entrance.

The interior of the house was stylish. Massive paintings hung from the walls: minimalistic, expensive looking. The lounge had shelves from the floor to the ceiling stacked full of collectable vinyl records and record player softly playing classic rock. Shelves not inhabited by musical treasures were filled with books about travel, cars, architecture, and searching for the meaning of life.

Helen invited me to place my belongings down and introduced me to the dogs, a task she seemed to consider of utmost importance: "People ask me why I don't have kids. These guys are my kids." All of Helen's basset hounds were rescues; their individual heartbreaking backstories were explained to me while I knelt to meet them at eye-level with one hand cautiously extended and my body relaxed – following the strict greeting instructions I was given by Helen.

After the dogs had greeted me, Helen donned her wide-brimmed sunhat and shoved a pair of bright red gardening gloves into the back pocket of her beige trousers.

We set out through the vast tract of land surrounding the house. Some parts of the property were manicured and well-shaded, while others resembled the bushveld – dry, beige, dotted with scraggly thorn trees. The garden of Willow Bay seemed to contain each type of environment possible in this region of South Africa. Each of these micro-environments was arable and, Helen told me, would eventually be self-sustaining, though this would take several years of hard work and careful planning.

We set out to "the nursery", a part of the garden right outside to the kitchen window, where Helen could keep a close eye on the seedlings. A few tables covered in plastic pots of various shapes and sizes contained germinating seeds and little green shoots, flanked by shelves packed with trays of dirt. I moved from tray to tray, reading the labels which identified each set of seeds and the date they were planted: avo 17/02, spring onion 29/03, apricot 04/03. Helen dug her finger into each pot, rubbing the soil between her fingers and examining each bit of dirt with a furrowed brow. She tutted: "They're all dry. Shame, babies – so thirsty. Nobody cares for them when I'm in Joburg". Helen employed a small army of staff to tend to the food forest while she was away from Willow Bay, but their performance, it seems, rarely impressed her.

Helen handed me a watering can, and we watered the seedlings together. We dug out each little seedling with our fingers to see whether they had germinated, tossing the unsuccessful seeds into the compost bin.

The bin filled quickly with withered sprouts and ungerminated seeds, so our next stop was the composting area. Nestled in the far corner of the property – away from scavenging dogs and sensitive noses – were heaps of soil, vegetable scraps, garden cuttings, all in various stages of decomposition. Helen explained the meticulous process of composting to me: a careful balance of temperature, pH levels, moisture, and – she emphasised – organic waste. She handed me handfuls of dirt, encouraging me to smell, feel, and even taste – I couldn't stomach the latter, despite Helen insisting that "it's all organic, it's fine" as she put pinches of warm dirt onto her tongue. Each mound teemed and wriggled with life – the sign of a healthy ecosystem, Helen told me, as she plucked fat pink earthworms from the dirt to admire them in the light. Once the compost was ready, she explained, it would be used across the food forest, nurturing future generations of plants to perpetuate the "symbiotic cycle of life".

Helen became very emotional as we passed the empty chicken coup. She'd left this place untouched since the day the neighbour's dogs broke in and killed all her chickens. The coup was perfectly preserved, almost shrine-like: the feed-bowls were still full, and carefully painted wooden signs were still hanging above each nesting-shelf, informing visitors of the now deceased residents' names. The chickens, like her basset hounds, had all been "rescues"; she didn't eat the eggs they produced, and regarded them as companions.

As we walked on, Helen wiped away a few tears: "The neighbours didn't even care. They said, 'they're just chickens.' I don't get people sometimes. My babies were just as important to me – actually, more important to me than the neighbours and their dogs."

Next, we meandered through a tunnel-shaped greenhouse, the tables inside piled high with beans, buckets full of baby tomatoes, sunflower-heads, large yellow squashes – and, of course, more plants arrayed in trays and pots. Helen greeted each of her plants, calling them nicknames that played on a variation of their species: Betty Basil, Tommy Tomato. She asked the plants questions, commented on their personalities, and told me about each of their temperaments. Helen told me she firmly believed in expressing gratitude to plants, and asked I do the same – before plucking, cutting, uprooting, or taking from the plant in any way, we were to thank them for what they had provided us. As we began to gather ingredients for lunch, I witnessed Helen performing her ritual of gratitude: kneeling over a leek, she bowed her head and whispered softly, before harvesting the vegetable with a single firm tug.

The four bassets and I followed Helen to a fenced-off area – the orchard. She invited me to take off my shoes – partly because there were all sorts of insects and plants and ecosystems that Helen tried to avoid disrupting with outside contaminants, and partly because the ground was pleasantly cool, kept damp by the fine mist of water spraying continuously from the irrigation system. We snaked barefooted between peach trees, almond trees, gooseberry bushes, granadilla plants, melons, and radishes. Helen encouraged me to pick and taste a variety of the produce: We pulled strangely-shaped carrots from the ground, dusting the soil off to eat them on the spot. We waded our hands through an old bathtub, alive with reeds and lily pads, to fish out water chestnuts. We dropped watermelons on the ground to crack them open, leaving their rinds behind to nourish the next organism. We filled our pockets with almonds from a tree to crack open later.

Fruit juice ran down our faces and arms as we ate; there was dirt under our fingernails, and cool, damp earth under our bare feet.

Every part of the food forest was abuzz with nonhuman activity: butterflies, wasps, worms, beetles, birds, and insects of all kinds. Helen welcomed them all to feast on- and live amongst the produce. There was more than enough to go around, she told me, and there was no harm in cutting off a piece of an apple that had been pecked at by birds or gnawed at by caterpillars. In Helen's symbiotic kingdom, every life had a purpose and place, which was reflected in her methods of pest control, such as they were. First, Helen would ask the unwanted guests in her garden nicely to leave. If they did not leave, she would then physically relocate them, which involved painstakingly removing tiny bugs from the infected plant and moving them elsewhere9. If this too failed, Helen resorted to her homemade insect repellent, a concoction of vinegar, bicarbonate of soda, and homegrown chillies. She assured me, however, that pest control

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[9] This did sometimes backfire. Once, after Helen successfully relocated dozens of worms from a citrus tree to a patch of grass, she posted a photograph of this triumph on a Facebook gardening group and instructed her fellow members to stop using pesticides and killing insects. Commenters then pointed out that the worms pictured were caterpillars of the swallowtail butterfly, which exclusively fed on citrus, and they would not survive the relocation. Helen was devastated to learn that she had inadvertently killed so many innocents.

was rarely necessary– the food forest's layout was carefully designed to pair up companion plants, and bug-repelling herbs and bushes were strategically placed between pests' favourites. As for the birds, they were kept at bay by the mannequins – not scarecrows – which stood amongst the fruit trees. A few of these figures were adorned with bulky, eccentric jewellery pieces made from sparkly beads, shells, and fine chains. When the wind blew, these intentionally-designed accessories would clank and rattle in the wind, supposedly keeping feathery visitors away.

Towards the back of the orchard, obscured from the driveway by thickets and trees, was a massive warehouse. When Helen noticed my eyes drifting to this misplaced-looking building, she offered an unprompted explanation: "My husband's car collection – one of the largest private collections in Africa". My curiosity was piqued, so Helen led us on a detour past the collection, allowing me a brief glance inside. Knowing very little about cars, I could only guess at the value of the collection that stood before me: The two-storey warehouse contained more than 200 vehicles – some imported, some classic, some vintage, some customised, some luxury. I was dazzled by the scale and grandeur of it all, but Helen's voice brought me back to my senses: "… that red one is a Porsche 968 Cup, that's the Lamborghini Jalpa, and that one is a Jaguar E type. Cool, hey? Anyways, I'm feeling peckish. Let's go get started on lunch."

The tour concluded in Helen's sleek, modern kitchen – white marble counters were dotted with ornate bowls full of ripening fruits and state-of-the-art appliances. Helen began by preparing a snack for us to enjoy while we put together our lunch: homemade sourdough crackers – made from sourdough bread she had baked the day before especially for this purpose – served with homemade hummus, pesto, and fresh crudites, washed down with a glass of organic sparkling wine. As she prepared the food, Helen flitted and danced around the kitchen, bringing me things to taste, smell, and sample. She showed me pictures of her most prized produce and shared her dreams of creating a sustainable, vegan world.

Helen handed me a chopping board and one of her custom-made Japanese knives. Tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, zucchinis, onions, and garlic – all from the food forest – were washed, sliced, and popped into the oven. Next to go in the oven was the rye dough that had been resting since the night before. Soon, the kitchen swirled with aromas of fresh bread and roasting garlic. I separated basil and oregano leaves from their stems and Helen cooked the pasta: "Sorry, storebought", she rolled her eyes as she held up the packet of organic penne. While we waited for the white wine sauce to reduce and for the olives to marinate, we set the patio table on the deck overlooking the glittering waters of the dam, where we'd have a view of the passing boats and the ducks bobbing lazily along the shore.

About 3 hours later, lunch was ready. Helen topped up our wine and poured us glasses of water infused with lemon, cucumber, and mint. Once we were settled, Helen took a moment to express her gratitude for all the food we were about to eat: "Thank you for your nourishing energy, thank you for sharing your goodness with us, thank you for the opportunity to participate in the cycle of life". The meal was exceptional, while Helen insisted that this was a casually thrown-together lunch, I couldn't help but feel like I had stepped into the pages of an upmarket lifestyle magazine.

When I complimented Helen on her cooking, she replied, "You can really taste the difference when it's organic and grown with love, hey?" I nodded in agreement, but I was not quite sure I could taste either love or organic-ness – there was a lot of garlic, though.

As the sun started to set over the dam, we cleared the table, and Helen packed the leftover pasta in a container for me to take home. The crockery and cutlery were piled high around the kitchen, but when I started doing the dishes, Helen waved me off: "The cleaner will be in tomorrow". She led me back to my car, and insisted I take a box of fresh produce she had harvested during our tour. This box, Helen reminded me, would've set me back at least R700 if I'd purchased it from her stall at the organic market. Saying goodbye, she leaned into the car to hand me a glass bottle of green juice – made from homegrown lemons, ginger, spinach, and kale – to energize me for the long drive home.

> Helen's vision of a future where every person could live off the land as she did became increasingly distant as I drove away from the high walls of Willow Bay. As I passed through the towns and townships surrounding Johannesburg, I saw reminders of the stark inequality of South African society everywhere around me: a man without shoes making a bed of plastic sheets under a bus stop, someone rummaging through an overflowing bin, a mother begging at a traffic light while her child played with gravel and an empty Coca Cola bottle on the ground nearby. I gave the mother Helen's box of fresh produce and the container of leftovers, and made my way home.

I met Helen in 2019, when I joined the JCAN as a passionate and naïve activist. Helen had invited me to attend one of the organisation's vigils at a chicken slaughterhouse in Olifantsfontein, after I contacted her on Facebook to express interest in joining the JCAN. Helen arrived at the vigil in an electric BMW, her blonde hair parted stylishly, her signature large sunglasses in place. I recognised her from the pictures posted by JCAN on Facebook – a slim woman in her fifties, equipped with an armful of posters and a phone mounted on a selfie stick.

Being new to the scene, I spent my first vigil at Helen's side, in part to learn how to *be* an activist, and in part because she was the only familiar face. She walked me through the correct procedures to follow when approaching the trucks, instructed me how to address any questions that may arise from passersby or slaughterhouse employees, and explained how to take photographs of the animals inside the trucks.

Helen kept close tabs on the activists, ensuring we were following the organisation's guidelines and offering us hugs and words of comfort when we felt overwhelmed. I remember being inspired by Helen's bravery, and I admired how she demonstrated her commitment to our cause: how she stepped out in front of trucks holding a sign asking the truck drivers to stop, so that the activists may show the animals in the truck a "moment of compassion"; how confidently and convincingly she spoke about veganism; how composed and kind she appeared when approaching the animals. Helen seemed very knowledgeable, educating both the activists and passersby about what was happening to the chickens in the slaughterhouse and the detrimental effects of consuming animal products on human health and the environment.

After this first vigil, Helen and I crossed paths a few other times: at protests organised by another vegan group, Speak Up for the Silenced, at one street march organised by End Animal Exploitation, and at another march organised by Helen herself. The latter was a well-attended march through the streets of Sandton, representing the Johannesburg portion of the World Animal Rights March.

At the beginning of my Masters, I approached Helen with the intent of doing participant observation with the JCAN. She went above and beyond to facilitate my fieldwork, granting me access to the Johannesburg chapter as well as contacting the overarching organisation to secure the necessary authorisations.

After the acceptance of my research proposal, having secured ethical clearance, I set off to attend my first JCAN vigil as a researcher. Upon arrival, I greeted Helen, who responded by introducing herself; she seemed to have forgotten our previous encounters. She immediately took me by the arm and led to the gates of the slaughterhouse, where she pointed out to the specific warehouse where the activists believed the gas chambers to be situated.

“Listen to the screaming,” she told me, “We pay for that every time we put meat on our plate. Your bacon is not worth taking these animals’ lives. And for what? We can nourish our bodies with delicious, cruelty-free food from plants!”

She continued to tell me about the workings of the slaughterhouse and the sentience of animals, seemingly attempting to convince me to go vegan. At one point during this attempted conversion, I managed to break in, saying “I’ve reached a point now where I don’t miss nonvegan foods anymore”. At this, Helen did a double take: “Wait – you’re vegan?” When I responded that I was, indeed, already vegan, her tone changed noticeably and instantly, becoming warm and welcoming. She then introduced me to the other activists present, and excitedly explained that I would be spending some time with the group for my Masters research.

Over the following 14 months, I spent time with Helen as she went about JCAN and related activities. Despite building good rapport and even being invited to her home as well as her holiday home, as described in the vignette above, I found Helen to be quite guarded with regards to the more personal aspects of her life. While I conducted three life history interviews with Helen – each conversation lasting at least two hours – the details of her own biography were difficult to nail down. The chronology and framing of her life history is thus quite striking: Helen's account of herself focused solely on her veganism and matters related to her veganism, despite my many attempts to steer our conversations towards other aspects of her life. This was not entirely dissimilar to how the other participants chose to share their stories – like Helen, they also framed going vegan as a pivotal moment in their lives – but her steadfast avoidance of other topics was noteworthy. Helen insisted it was not worth discussing the version of herself that she called "past me".

Over the course of our interviews and our many informal conversations, it became apparent that "past me" referred to Helen's conception of her pre-vegan self – a version of herself she seemingly no longer recognised or related to. She repeatedly framed her transition to veganism as an "awakening", a "turning point", or a "rebirth"; she seemed to have completely discarded her previous identity.

This trenchant divide in Helen's account for her life speaks to how essential veganism had become to her identity, and perhaps points to an ongoing attempt to construct herself as a moral individual dedicated to a noble cause. I now turn to my retelling of Helen's story.

Contextualising Helen

From the little Helen told me about her past, I gathered that she was 57 years old and had lived in and around Johannesburg for most of her life. When I first met her, she and her husband, Steven, divided their time between their property in Linksfield and their holiday home in Willow Bay, spending most weekends away from the city.

The couple had no human offspring and considered their four rescue dogs to be their children. Helen and Steven had always shared an affinity for basset hounds, but after Helen went vegan, she refused to continue purchasing dogs from breeders and involved herself with a breed-specific organisation rescue instead.

In addition to being a proud "dog-mommy", Helen took her role as an aunt seriously, and often spent much of the year visiting her nieces and nephews in the United States. Beaming, she told me about the adventures that "Crazy Aunty Bee" and the children had gotten up to during her most recent visit: beach excursions, boat cruises, late-night vegan ice cream runs, pottery classes, art classes, and expeditions into the forest.

Steven had had a successful and very lucrative career in the financial services sector. Alongside his work as an investment manager, he kept himself occupied with various business ventures – one of these being "The Beanery", a chain of three eateries located throughout Johannesburg. Though Helen occasionally got involved with The Beanery, she did not want to commit herself to a more active role in the day-to-day management of the business. She had developed a distaste for the restaurant industry while running a popular pizzeria with her late mother in Ilovo. They'd made it six years, Helen told me, before the stress became too much and they sold the place.

Despite her distaste for the restaurant industry, Helen still maintained a love for food and enjoyed working with people, and The Beanery thus provided the perfect opportunity for her flexible involvement. Helen played a key role in The Beanery, adding vegan options to its menu, and the restaurant's first vegan offerings were dishes Helen herself had carefully crafted in her home kitchen(s). She also baked for the restaurant, producing the vegan shortbread cookies The Beanery served with every hot beverage, as well as a portion of their sourdough bread – all from her home kitchen(s). Helen still wanted to get a contract written up between herself and The Beanery, so that she could "turn it into a business" – "I know it's my husband's restaurant, but I am not doing it for free!". Helen also sold bags of her homemade granola from her husband's restaurants. Jam-packed with healthy nuts, fruits, and seeds, a 250g bag of granola was priced at R78.

In addition to providing the restaurant with various baked goods, Helen also occasionally helped with training the staff. Leaning on her experience as a restaurateur, Helen taught the waitstaff about etiquette, customer service, and educated them about veganism. She found staff at other restaurants to be "ignorant and uneducated" when it came to plant-based foods and sought to prevent The Beanery from falling into the same trap. Helen told me her training also occasionally included "motivation and inspiration", which she felt helped the staff maintain a positive attitude, and she believed was good for business overall.

Helen was particularly glad that The Beanery provided her the platform to sell her home-baked sourdough bread – an endeavour she was passionate about. Her interest in sourdough had come about after she'd seen her brother posting his own sourdough loaves on Instagram. Helen had seen this as a challenge – "If he could do it, surely I could, too!". After some research, Helen managed to grow her own sourdough starter. She named the starter Elizabeth, after her late mother. Helen felt that her mother lived on in this way – sourdough starters are "living and growing" – when I 'met' Elizabeth in Helen's kitchen, she was four years old and still going strong – and every loaf that Helen baked using Elizabeth nourished people, like a mother would.

Once Helen got the hang of bread-making, she decided to start selling her loaves to her friends and neighbours. Soon, her home kitchen(s) could not keep up with the demand, and Steven built her a state-of-the-art bakery at Willow Bay, complete with a 1.2-metre-wide oven a 30-litre mixer. The plans for doing similar renovations at their Johannesburg home were already in the works – they intended to convert one of their double garages into a bakery for Helen to use when she was in the city. Steven and Helen also imported a custom *Bakfiets* – a specialty cargo bike, made in the Netherlands – so that Helen could cycle through the neighbourhood to do eco-friendly bread deliveries to the neighbourhood. Helen was also busy testing recipes for a sourdough *challah*, which she hoped to sell to the Jewish community in her area.

Helen had converted to Judaism more than a decade before I came to know her, shortly after she'd met Steven. When the two of them were first getting to know one another, Helen joined Steven for Shul every Friday night and Saturday morning. She was enthralled by what she encountered there; she loved "the singing, rituals, the meaning and symbolism, and ceremony of it all". Helen soon signed up for a course offered at the shul in her area. She was under the impression that she would receive instruction in Hebrew and learn more about Judaism in the process, and was surprised to learn that she'd actually signed up for a *conversion* course: "I wasn't aware that I was becoming Jewish, to be honest, and we laugh about it to this day. I was like, 'oh, okay. Great. Bonus!'".

Despite her unconventional – and somewhat unintentional – entry into Judaism, Helen felt a deep sense of connection and belonging upon converting. Seeking more involvement in her newfound community, she joined her shul's organising committee. But Helen's time on the committee was ultimately short-lived: "There was so much fighting, arguing, tension, and *woes* *tannies*[10]… it just became a bit too real." Helen realised what she truly valued about the shul: "I think I preferred my Judaism where I was in the shul listening to the rabbi preach, and following through on the book, and then singing and learning the songs. I was loving the pace of it and the – what's the word – when you are immersed in the spiritual aspect of it all, where it really just fills your soul, right? It really, really was so beautiful." Although Helen still considered herself Jewish, she had stepped away from "the institution of it"; at the time of our interview, she did not attend shul at all.

In addition to her involvement with The Beanery, Helen also pursued many other passion projects. One of her more recent projects centred on a new addition to Willow Bay's extensive car collection: an Airstream caravan, imported from America. Helen and Steven had converted the Airstream into a quirky, off-the-grid vacation rental overlooking the marina, shaded by a copse of willow trees. Helen proudly showed me the listings for "Amy the Airstream" on various websites, where the caravan was touted as "the first of its kind in South Africa" and an "experience unlike any other".

Another passion of Helen's that Willow Bay allowed her to pursue was art – she had a studio on the property, in a converted shipping container adjacent to the main house, complete with air-conditioning and a built-in sound system. When I asked Helen how she would describe her style of art, she told me that she does not like the confines of labels, as she felt they would limit her creativity. Not knowing much about art myself, I would cautiously describe the works that Helen showed me as abstract. The works she was most proud of were the pair of near-identical canvases she had painted for Steven's 60th birthday, now displayed in the entrance of their *Willow Bay* home. Each canvas featured two thick black vertical lines on the left; a grey horizontal stripe running across the canvas; a small, sharp red stripe in the top right-hand corner; and a large yellow circle in the bottom right corner. While producing these pieces, Helen told me, she'd become so engrossed that she didn't leave her art studio for three days.

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[10] Loosely translated from Afrikaans, "difficult/wild aunties".

The studio was also where Helen did most of her knitting, sewing, and crocheting. Her interest in textile crafts had started after the death of her mother, when Helen inherited her tools, her materials, and her unfinished projects. Helen once proudly showed me a quilt she had sewn for another family member, as well as several hats, scarves, and wash cloths she had knitted as gifts for her friends. She was sure to remind me that she only used synthetic fibres and not sheep's wool. Helen took great pleasure in gifting her creations to friends and family members – she felt that homemade gifts were not only more thoughtful, but also more sustainable. Helen told me she felt strongly that overconsumption and greed were "a plague on society", and that she tried to live in a way that combatted such evils.

Sowing seeds of sustainability

The food forest at Willow Bay was one of the ways in which Helen sought to live more sustainably and, in her words, be "one with the land". Helen first began the food forest project during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020. Having planted a few fruit trees several years before, Helen's shifting beliefs and interests now motivated her to start getting serious about growing her own food.

Setting up the food forest required a significant investment of both time and effort – and presumably, actual capital, though Helen did not touch on the costs involved. Helen and her staff worked according to the guidelines she had found through her research, properly preparing the soil and carefully designing the food forest's layout. This process took about three months. Establishing a solid foundation for the food forest was of paramount importance, as this would ensure that the food forest would eventually be able to flourish with little to no human interference. By the time I had met Helen, three years had passed, and she still felt that the food forest was excessively resource- and labour-intensive. Because she travelled frequently, Helen told me, she was not able to keep a close eye on the staff to whom she had delegated the day-to-day management of the food forest. She was dissatisfied with her employees, feeling that they did not provide the standard of care her food forest required – sometimes, she felt, their actions were downright neglectful.

Despite Helen's concerns about those who tended to her food forest on her behalf, the resulting produce was nonetheless abundant enough to inspire yet another of Helen's entrepreneurial opportunities: she setup an organic produce stall at a market nearby Willow Bay. "Farmer Bee's Organic Produce", as she dubbed her stall, offered seasonal fruit and vegetables, freshly squeezed juices, hummus, pesto, homemade sourdough, and a soup of the day. Every Saturday and Sunday, Helen and her "right hand man" Petrus – who was employed as a gardener and groundskeeper at *Willow Bay* – would set off at 5AM in the morning, armed with two flasks of coffee with oat milk. Helen and Petrus would spend their days at the market networking with the local community, "spreading the word" about the "importance of organic farming". Helen was sure to tell me that Petrus took home whatever produce and prepared food they did not manage to sell each weekend. She felt that Petrus, who was paid for his time at the market, genuinely valued his time there: "He really enjoys being there. Sometimes we would bring a speaker, sometimes he'd bring his kids…it's great fun".

This produce stall, like all of Helen's food-related pursuits, were part of her attempt to repair what she considered "a broken food system". For Helen, the "broken food system" referred broadly to the industrialised production of food and the way in which food products are subsequently distributed and consumed; she had concerns about everything from the "chemicals and pesticides" used to grow food to the diets of individual consumers.

Helen felt that our food system centred on greed and profits, rather than the wellbeing of people and the planet. She believed that today's mainstream diet was too fast, convenient, too processed, excessively animal-heavy, and lacking in essential nutrients:

> It's money versus the need for health, and money wins, hands down. We've moved to processed food, junk food, we've moved to food that's no longer serving us. Where I have control and space to be lucky enough to grow and have a garden to feed myself and know what's going in, that's what I wanted to do. […] That was the motivating factor, that we'd have our own food, and it healthy and organic and we know what's in it. There's no junk.

The shift towards a "modern way of living", Helen explained, was causing unprecedented environmental degradation, as well as an increase in preventable diseases– the latter, she believed, was by design: "Animal agriculture and big pharma, it's always been said, are in bed with each other. So, it doesn't matter that you eat flesh and it gives you cancer, because big pharma will step in and help you. So, there's a huge, big link there."

These critiques of the food system had been the driving force behind Helen's food forest; she felt that a food forest would allow her time to live more "naturally and harmoniously" with other life-forms. She encouraged others to follow her example: "Anyone can start a veggie garden – don't even need a lot of space".

Ultimately, Helen envisioned a future in which humans "go back to our roots"; a healthier planet, with healthier people, where every person is involved in growing their own organic food. Helen believed veganism would be humanity's salvation – the key to realising the future she imagined. It was veganism, after all, that had led to her "awakening to the truth".

Helen's awakening: From *Veganuary* to veganism

Helen attributes her entry into veganism to a campaign called *Veganuary*. "Veganuary" is an online campaign that challenges non-vegans to adopt vegan diet for the month of January (Veganuary, 2023). First launched in 2014 by a UK nonprofit, Veganuary today runs campaigns across the globe, including in South Africa. The Veganuary nonprofit teamed up with local "food awareness organisation" ProVeg South Africa (ProVeg International, 2022) to raise awareness about veganism and to encourage nonvegans to try it out – for the sake of the environment, the animals, and their own health. The campaign did so by encouraging consumers to try vegan food and purchase vegan products, helped along by businesses offering Veganuary discounts on their vegan products[11]. Veganuary was also marked by "giveaways" of vegan products, events such as catered dinners and vegan high-teas, and a flurry of social media activity from vegan activists and influencers. As is the case for the Compassion Advocacy Movement – and for most vegan organisations, for that matter – the core mission of Veganuary and ProVeg South Africa is the pursuit of a vegan world.

Helen first learned of the campaign in late 2017, when Frankie – a vegan friend of hers – encouraged her to try taking the Veganuary challenge, and Helen agreed to include the challenge in her New Year's resolutions. Upon "signing up" for Veganuary through their website, Helen received an electronic vegan starter kit, free of charge – a plethora of recipes, meal plans, nutritional advice, coaching emails, informative blog posts, as well as an assortment of other emails concerning all things vegan.

Helen was particularly struck by the testimonials included in the Veganuary emails, in which individuals shared *why* they had chosen to go vegan – from concerns about animal welfare and the environmental impact of animal agriculture, to the deleterious effects of animal products on human health. While Helen had "heard it all before" – Frankie had often tried to sway her with graphic descriptions of the day-to-day workings of animal agriculture – the thorough information packets from Veganuary were what ultimately made an impact on Helen:

"I think the hammer in the nail was the actual, physical reading, when Veganuary sends you the content to read about why one chooses not to eat animals or use them. I don't know why that was more smash-in-the-gut than a friend saying to me ‘this is what happens on dairy farms’ kind of thing... There was some savage stuff that you are kind of hit with. It is all part of the Veganuary package. That for me was a huge turning point, that by the 3rd of January, I wasn’t even trying Veganuary for the month of January. I had decided that I was going to be vegan for life, and that was it. I haven’t looked back.”

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[11] For example, one popular health-food restaurant chain offered a 30% discount all vegan meals for the month of January.

Helen felt that the resources and support that she had available to her were sufficient to make her transition to veganism easy and enjoyable. Initially, Helen experienced self-imposed isolation, as she refused to eat with friends and family who consumed animal products in her presence. She soon realised that such inflexibility was not sustainable and opted to use social interactions involving food as educational opportunities instead: Helen began speaking openly about the horrors of the animal agriculture industry around tables. Her social circle was mostly understanding of her new lifestyle and made provisions for her by only opting for restaurants (or, in the case of private events, caterers) that offered vegan options. Steven made the decision to go vegetarian shortly after Helen stopped “cooking animal flesh at home”, but she swore it was by his own accord.

Two years after going vegan, Helen set out to get a tattoo symbolising her lifelong commitment to veganism and to animals – half a calf’s face on her forearm. Accompanied by Frankie and a bottle of *Veuve Clicquot* champagne for moral support, Helen endured the pain of her first-ever tattoo – a worthwhile pain, she told me; a ritual to prove her unwavering dedication. Somewhat sheepishly, she mentioned that her Jewish relatives did not approve of this, as tattoos are technically forbidden in Judaism. Helen, having already drifted away from the Jewish community, felt that her tattoo was meaningful enough to warrant bending the rules of her chosen faith.

Becoming a voice for the voiceless: activism

Shortly after committing herself to lifelong veganism, Helen felt compelled to do more. She wanted to do for others what Frankie had done for her: "awaken [them] to the truth" for the animals' sake.

To this end, Helen joined the only active vegan animal rights group active in South Africa at the time, Speak Up for the Silenced. Speak Up for the Silenced is a global animal rights organisation with chapters worldwide, including three small South African chapters in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban. Helen attended the group's protests, which consisted of activists standing in a cube formation holding devices displaying slaughterhouse footage while wearing Guy Fawkes masks popularised by the hacktivist group "Anonymous"[12]. Helen's time volunteering with Speak Up for the Silenced galvanised her vegan activism – she cherished her interactions with like-minded people, felt inspired by the activists she encountered, and learned much about their methods and strategies. Recognising the limited scope of vegan activism in South Africa, Helen set about building a more active vegan community, drawing her inspiration from international movements and well-known vegan activists operating elsewhere.

One of her proudest achievements was organising an animal rights march through the streets of Sandton. Helen had learned of a worldwide animal rights march, taking place in over 25 cities across the globe, and saw an opportunity to put South African vegans on the map. Over a scant five days, Helen managed to plan a route, arrange road closures, organise volunteer marshals, notify the press, secure the necessary permits and police escorts – and successfully rallied support from local animal rights organisations and independent activists. The march was well-attended, with over 150 people (including myself) brandishing posters for various animal rights causes. Helen led the marchers through chants on a megaphone and gave a moving speech to initiate and conclude the protest. At the time of writing, this event still stands out as a prominent occasion in the recent history of animal rights activism in Johannesburg, and in South Africa as a whole – and Helen had organised and funded it all on her own.

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[12] With its origins in *V for Vendetta,* this mask was chosen by Speak Up for the Silenced because the organisation sees it as a widely-recognisable symbol for resisting oppression.

Continuing her efforts to build a more active vegan community in her area, Helen decided to start the JCAN. She had read about the Compassionate Advocacy Network on social media and had been particularly taken by the concept of slaughterhouse vigils. Helen contacted the "main" CAN branch based in Canada, corresponding with CAN's co-founder via email, who granted Helen permission to initiate a South African chapter of the organisation. Helen studied the organisation's standards, procedures, and strategies, and followed the step-by-step instructions for organising a chapter outlined on CAN's website – and soon, JCAN was born.

Helen's plans for JCAN extended beyond animal activism – she founded both the Johannesburg Climate Compassion Advocacy Network and the Johannesburg Health Compassion Advocacy Network as offshoots of the broader Compassion Advocacy Network. Neither of these offshoots operate independently, reflecting the official stance of CAN that these causes are all interlinked; veganism is considered the solution to both the climate crisis and global ill-health. Each of these nodes of the JCAN have their own social media presence – all three pages run by Helen.

As the organiser of JCAN and its offshoots, Helen was expected to represent, promote, and expand the network of JCAN. CAN organised a variety of "activations" and campaigns that ran throughout the year. Although participation was encouraged, it was at the behest of the local chapters' organisers as to whether their chapter would get involved in any given campaign. The costs of such activations were to be covered by each chapter's organiser.

I attended one such campaign, called "Down with Dairy". Helen had ensured that the JCAN was one of the nine international CAN branches hosting events. The premise was simple: encourage people to consume less dairy, and collect signatures for a treaty intended to put pressure on governments to systemically foster a shift to plant-based diets. Signing the treaty was also supposed to indicate a commitment to individual diet change.

The JCAN's Down with Dairy campaign took place just outside an upmarket supermarket at Melrose Arch in Johannesburg. Helen had managed to convince two vegan businesses to sponsor cupcakes and vegan ice cream, and her husband's restaurant, The Beanery, had donated a coffee machine, a barista, and plenty of oat milk. Joined by two other activists, Helen set out to sell as many R15 oat milk cappuccinos to passersby as possible. The relatively cheap coffees came at the cost of signing the treaty – likewise, the cupcakes and ice cream were to be handed out free of charge to signatories of the petition. The activists used these interactions as a chance to speak about the detrimental effects of animal agriculture, and dairy in particular. Helen took to social media later that day, posting photos and a glowing writeup about how successful they'd been. This activation was typical of the kinds that Helen organised: the approach – free treats accompanied by educational efforts – and the audience – middle to upper class South Africans – were similar, as was the message: "Go vegan to save the animals, the planet, and your health". Vigils, as we will see, were a different beast entirely.

"We're not here to be vigilantes"

As the organiser of JCAN, Helen was responsible for ensuring that the chapter was operating safely, legally, and effectively[13]. The overarching organisation outlined specific roles that need to be fulfilled for a chapter to operate efficiently: an action and events planner, a photographer, a social media organiser, a fundraiser, a recruiter, and so on. At JCAN, these positions would need to be filled by unpaid volunteers, as the chapter had little to no source of funding, and very few members. The most well-attended JCAN vigil I took part in had nine activists in attendance – including me – with most vigils consisting of four or fewer activists. With no way to full the roles outlined by CAN, Helen had to do it all herself.

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[13] It is important to note here that the overarching organisation does not monitor or survey the branches. Each organiser is expected to self-govern. While Helen occasionally had virtual meetings with other branch organisers, there were no apparent consequences for guidelines not being upheld.

Helen frequently lamented that she was carrying the weight of the chapter alone, and often encouraged other activists to get more involved. While Louis and Esme were both passionate activists, and were certainly keen to take more active roles in organising and running the JCAN vigils, Helen was not confident that they could be trusted to follow CAN guidelines. As such, Helen felt she could not allow Louis and Esme to take on any official roles in JCAN, and she did not delegate any of her responsibilities to them.

This was not an unreasonable concern – Louis and Esme shared Helen's passion and principles, but not her adherence to CAN's policies. On one occasion, Esme saw that a sickly-looking pig had fallen over inside one of the trucks entering the slaughterhouse, and informed the gathered activists that the farmer, transport company and slaughterhouse were all in violation of laws pertaining to the transport of animals. She proposed that we threaten the slaughterhouse's management with legal action, and demand that this poorly animal be handed over into JCAN's custody. Helen frantically responded that any effort to confiscate the pig would directly violate CAN's policies. Moreover, this action would create animosity between JCAN and the slaughterhouse, compromising Helen's ability to secure management's cooperation for future vigils, and disregarding CAN's guidelines on maintaining civil and respectful relationships with slaughterhouses. While Esme respected Helen's instructions on this occasion, the incident had a lasting impact on Esme and Louis. Over subsequent vigils, the two of them developed a shared dream of one day rescuing a pig marked for slaughter – a secret ambition, of which they did not inform Helen. Perhaps fortunately, the logistical challenges inherent to rescuing and relocating a pig from a truck in broad daylight prevented Louis and Esme from realising their dream.

In addition to their hushed discussions about one day rescuing a pig, Louis and Esme openly discussed their desire to enter the slaughterhouse in Helen's presence – they wanted to see its inner workings for themselves, and to capture footage of the horrors inside. Helen was often frustrated with Esme and Louis' gung-ho approach, which she felt diverged from the spirit of JCAN:

> I would never do anything to any slaughterhouse. I don't know if you've noticed with Esme and them, on the Whatsapps, whenever there's a "we should just do it" attitude, I will always be respectful. It's one of the CAN's principles. We're not here to be vigilantes. We come from a place of love, and we come from a place of respect.

Helen, in other words, did not believe that Esme and Louis had properly grasped and adopted CAN's foundational principles. While she had sympathy for their fervour, Helen knew that recklessness could compromise future vigils – and perhaps the very existence of the JCAN:

> Louis gets very emotive, and so do I. I can understand it, I'm not saying he's wrong. I would love to go, "fuck you" to every slaughterhouse worker and just go and ram in – but you know what it will do? They will tell us, "You're never going to come back again" and who will that benefit? We can't get our message out there, we can't see the piggies, we can't be taking the footage, it only shoots ourselves in the foot. I work collaboratively and will give as much information, and just keep pushing.

Unsurprisingly, Helen often had to talk Esme and Louis down from acting overzealously. At the start of most vigils, Helen would give the group a pep-talk, reminding the activists that they represent an organisation that prides itself on a "love and compassion-based approach". While the vigils usually unfolded relatively free of conflict, suggestions that went against CAN's guidelines became a standard feature of post-vigil meetups and Whatsapp group conversations.

Helen rarely attended the post-vigil meetups, which allowed the other activists to vent their frustrations about her leadership. Their chief complaint was that JCAN, under Helen's control, was simply not doing enough – Louis and Esme had a dramatically different version for what JCAN could do: they wanted to rescue pigs, organise more frequent vigils, arrange meetings with the slaughterhouses' management, interview the workers and truck drivers, print posters with graphic images designed to shock passersby, and they wanted to officially represent JCAN at other events – to name a few of the ideas they shared over a bottle of wine at one post-vigil meetup.

Louis and Esme particularly resented Helen's refusal to delegate; they had both repeatedly offered to take over some of her duties, but were shut down every time. Helen, for her part, maintained that she was simply acting in accordance with CAN's code of conduct. As leader of JCAN, she was responsible for upholding order within the chapter, ensuring the safety of activists and passersby, and maintaining a good public image; delegating to Louis and Esme would be too risky.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, Louis and Esme had started making changes to the vigils without asking Helen's permission. They incorporated handmade signage, where they'd previously been restricted to official CAN posters, and they'd begun handing out vegan food to passersby. Although the group was still formally under Helen's leadership, Louis took over the organisation and operations. Helen grew worried about the implications that Louis' and Esme's actions would have on their civil relationship with the slaughterhouse that enabled them to do vigils:

> I understand Louis and Esme and the whole team coming from a "it's got to be done" but it's not an overnight thing. One has to have a relationship so that we can carry on the relationship, you know? As hard as it is, it's almost like being friends with a rapist, to understand why they do what they do. You actually just need to be mature enough. The process is one of working together. It's almost like a corporate etiquette.

The quote above demonstrates a key aspect of Helen's approach to organising vigils. While Helen held strong views about slaughterhouses and the people they employ – as we see above, she even likened the manager of a slaughterhouse to a rapist. Yet Helen set aside her personal feelings in order to maintain the cordial relationships that enable her activism and ensure the JCAN's continued alignment with its parent organisation. CAN's rules specifically included an injunction that every branch *must* maintain a good working relationship with the slaughterhouses they visited for vigils, and CAN guideline encouraged activists to treat every slaughterhouse employee with respect and kindness.

CAN's guidelines recommended reaching out to the targeted slaughterhouses to establish a "safety agreement" – this might include, for example, the slaughterhouse agreeing to instruct all entering trucks to stop for a specific length of time at a specific point, so that the activists can say their goodbyes. In return, the activists agree to act courteously to employees, and to allow business operations to continue as normal. Per CAN's strategy, these safety agreements have several purposes: demonstrating that the group is cooperative and reasonable, allowing organisers to explain the goals of vigils, showcasing CAN's peaceful, "love-based" approach, and maintaining the civil relationships that make slaughterhouse vigils a viable, sustainable practice.

Helen thus diligently emailed the slaughterhouse manager, Bertus, before every intended vigil. On the occasions that Louis brought a vegan cake, Helen included in her emails an invitation to the slaughterhouse management to come join the activists for a slice – and perhaps a chat. Helen was also sure to inform the local police before vigils, as is recommended by CAN's guidelines for ensuring the safety of activists. By law, the organiser of a march or protest in South Africa need only inform police if 15 or more people are expected to attend. Helen nonetheless did so before each vigil – she reasoned that maintaining good communication with the local police couldn't hurt, even if it wasn't strictly necessary.

On one occasion, Helen had failed to inform Bertus and the police of the planned vigil – she blamed a technology mishap, but I suspect she had simply forgotten – and the management had consequently not instructed the truck drivers to stop outside the slaughterhouse as they usually did for JCAN vigils – the trucks drove straight past us – all four of them – leaving the activists confused, upset, and annoyed. At the roadside, Helen drafted an email from her iPhone, informing the slaughterhouse management and the police of our vigil, with the hope that the former would arrange for the trucks to stop as they usually did.

Helen received a sour response from the Chief Superintendent of the local police station:

> you have send this email 08:30 today, your gathering outside company even if you are four, it have complications, and again you left us with no time to verify with company concern about you coming there. I stand to believe it cannot be today, while you notify us today, it unfair how you operate [sic].

With only four activists in attendance, we did not technically *need* permission from either the police or the slaughterhouse. As Helen reminded the Chief Superintendent in her reply, she was only keeping them informed "to be courteous and polite". While Helen maintained that we were on the right side of the law, she suggested that, instead of their usual witness-bearing, the activists instead focus on talking to passersby and showing off their signs to passing cars. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Louis and Esme weren't happy with this compromise, and asked Helen to liaise with the security manager, Chris, to find a solution.

Helen and Chris had a good relationship, and Helen understood that she might be getting him in trouble with upper management when she approached him. Chris, glancing nervously at the slaughterhouse's offices towering over the gates, agreed to help. When the next truck arrived, Chris delayed it for a while at the gate, by having the driver sign a register– a once-standard but routinely neglected procedure, here resurrected for reasons completely unrelated to its original purpose – allowing the activists their moment with the pigs. As Chris walked up to the driver's window, register in hand, he shot Helen a knowing wink.

There was a threat

To the activists' disappointment, the truck Chris stalled with his bogus register was the fifth and final for the day. The activists believed that this was because JCAN's presence had led to trucks being redirected to other processing facilities, and based on this supposition, they regarded the day as a significant victory for the JCAN: they had, through peacefully bearing witness, disrupted the usual business operations of a slaughterhouse. They shared the day's events on the JCAN social media platforms, and celebrated a "powerful, impactful vigil".

This notion that "the industry" was threatened by the presence of the JCAN was a common motif at vigils. Helen had long believed the slaughterhouse throttled the number of trucks entering the slaughterhouses on vigil-days to obfuscate the "truth" – that is, the sheer number of animals being slaughtered daily, Helen believed (erroneously, in my assessment) that the slaughterhouse would want to keep these statistics hidden from the public [14]. Her email exchange with the Chief Superintendent had further fuelled the narrative that JCAN was a threat to "the industry" and their co-conspirators in the government: the activists believed that the *real* reason management and the police were so upset by the last-minute notification was that they'd not had an opportunity to redirect the trucks, and as such allowed JCAN to bear witness to *four* trucks entering the slaughterhouse before 8AM.

A key component of this conspiratorial narrative was an oft-repeated account of an incident that occurred before my time with JCAN. At a previous JCAN vigil, Helen, Louis, and Esme had stood on the service road in their usual, designated spot, waiting to bear witness, when a truck approached at an alarming speed. The activists, frightened, jumped back from the roadside. The driver sped past without stopping for the activists, contravening Helen's safety agreement with the slaughterhouse. As he passed, Helen shouted, "What's your problem?!"

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[14] These statistics are in fact prominently displayed on the slaughterhouse's website, though the marketing copy uses the phrasing "units processed" rather than "animals slaughtered".

In reply, the driver wordlessly slid his finger across his throat. The three activists agreed that, by directing this throat-slitting gesture at Helen, the driver was "threatening her life". Helen immediately reported the incident to Chris, who assured her that he would investigate further.

At JCAN's following vigil, Helen received an email from a man named Greg, apologising on behalf of John, the driver who had gestured at Helen. Greg explained that John struggled with English and did not have a device to send emails from, which is why Greg was writing on his behalf. While the email was mostly apologetic, Greg did speak in John's defence: John had simply been doing his job and had felt that the "people in the road" were trying to stop him from entering the slaughterhouse, and in doing so, putting his livelihood at risk. In her reply, Helen thanked Greg and John for the apology, but reiterated that John's actions had been totally unacceptable writing that "uncontrollable emotions and reactions to the public and especially women are a big worry".

This incident caused great stir amongst the activists, and for years later, they still relished in continuously retelling the story. JCAN activists often drew comparisons between Helen's incident and the death of Regan Russell, a Canadian animal rights activists who had been fatally struck by a truck carrying animals in 2020 while participating in a slaughterhouse vigil similar to those performed by JCAN. Russell's tragic death had sparked outrage amongst the global vegan community; there were protests and memorials dedicated to her memory across the world, and the incident was the subject of a documentary titled *There was a Killing.* While it had officially been ruled an accident[15], in vegan activist circles, Russell's death was a testament to the meat industry's inherently violent and aggressive nature.

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[15] The truck driver was convicted of "careless driving causing death", and the court ruled that there was no evidence of criminal intent.

For the JCAN activists, the incident with the gesturing truck driver provided them with their very own Regan Russell – Helen, whose "life [had been] threatened". They incorporated this narrative into their battery of reasons why people ought to stop supporting slaughterhouses: if people wouldn't do it for the animals, they might do it for the human activists who are treated so cruelly while protesting peacefully and lawfully.

The Chief Superintendent's email and the supposed redirection of the incoming trucks therefore slotted neatly into a narrative JCAN activists – especially Helen – were already invested in: that their witness-bearing activities were a real threat to this slaughterhouse and to the meat industry as a whole; that the slaughterhouse reacted to JCAN's mere presence with observable changes in its daily operations – that their activism was important, impactful, and meaningful.

A crisis of faith

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I sensed that Helen had been pulling away from JCAN. The other activists had taken to organising vigils without Helen's input, during one of her frequent sojourns to America. After returning from her three months' holiday in the States, Helen attended fewer vigils, and she also began encouraging Esme and Louis to take on her duties as Organiser – albeit without formally ceding her title.

I met up with Helen to find out why she'd been pulling away from the organisation. Initially, she cited her business endeavours, telling me that she was simply too busy – between baking sourdough at 4AM and pursuing her other projects in the evenings, there was little time to spare for JCAN: "Life is hectic, and unless I dedicate myself, unless I have loads of money were I can be rolling around doing nothing – that would make it a whole different thing."

I suspected, however, that Helen's withdrawal wasn't simply a result of her jam-packed schedule, and as our conversation continued, she confirmed this suspicion. Helen shared that she felt a sense of hopelessness about JCAN: Of the 50 or so members on the JCAN WhatsApp group, only a small handful were engaging in conversations, and even fewer were regularly attending vigils. Helen wondered aloud whether JCAN's efforts were futile; whether being present at the slaughterhouse made any difference at all. Perhaps, she speculated, it would be more effective to do activism on social media, rather than out on the streets.

Interestingly, during our last few encounters, Helen seemed to have begun questioning not only her activism, but also her veganism. Amidst a light-hearted chat about her travels, she suddenly blurted out: "Do you ever think about not being vegan? Because I have".

Helen then confessed that she had been questioning veganism for a while: While she was adamant that she'd never intentionally eat animal flesh again, she admitted in a whisper that she'd recently eaten one of her chickens' eggs, just to see if she could stomach it[16].Later during the same conversation, she mused about missing cheese:

> I didn't stop because I don't like the taste, so when I do see that cheese, yussus, sometimes it's tempting hey. Sometimes, I look at them and go, "fuck, I'd love to put that in my mouth." A crispy piece of bacon… then I'm like "no". So that's how engrained it is, the addiction, it's been 5 years down the line and sometimes I'm still like, "mmm" – a good dollop of melted gorgonzola.

None of the other vegans I encountered during my research seemed to doubt their veganism, and most other vegans I've met – both in the field and in my personal life– would insist that the very *thought* of consuming animal products was viscerally disgusting. Perhaps Helen was simply more honest than most – or perhaps her once unshakeable sense of conviction was unravelling. Helen often mentioned her "angry vegan phase"; the time immediately after she'd gone vegan, when Helen felt an immense, passionate anger towards her non-vegan friends, her non-vegan family, and the non-vegan world for not "seeing the truth". In our final conversations, it seemed to me that she'd become a different kind of angry – resigned, defeated, and hopeless. Helen felt that the vegan movement had too little momentum, and that progress had been too slow – especially compared to the trajectories of other social movements, such as the fight against Apartheid in South Africa and the Civil Rights Movement in the US.

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[16] Human consumption of "backyard eggs" is a point of contention in the vegan community. While some vegans point out that backyard chickens live happy lives and have no use for their unfertilised eggs, most vegans insist that it is not permissible to eat eggs, as taking anything from an animal without the animal's consent is unethical. Furthermore, it is often argued that chickens, when given the option, will eat their own unfertilised eggs to replenish lost nutrients. However, some schools of thought claim that eating eggs from backyard chickens is ethical – PETA, for example, infamously permits the consumption of backyard eggs.

Reflecting on her vegan journey, Helen concluded that she had been naïve in her ambitions to change the world:

> Maybe it was a sense of "I want be part of the change, I want to see change, I want to see justice, I want to see kindness, I want to see it all". And now, I can actually see the arrogance in that, and I can also see the futileness in it, because I cannot make a difference for the world. I can only make the difference for me, and that, I have to be comfortable with, because nothing else is in my control.

Helen's partial withdrawal from JCAN could be understood in terms of burnout, which is not uncommon for animal activists, particularly those confronted with animal bodies in the course of their activism (Cox 2011). Moreover, given all the energy, time, and money that Helen had invested into JCAN – and into the South African vegan movement as a whole – it is perhaps unsurprising that she eventually lost steam.

As with the other JCAN activists, I read Helen's veganism and her activism primarily as attempts to find meaning and belonging by constituting herself as a moral person. By founding JCAN, Helen provided vegan activists in Gauteng a new platform to fight for animal rights. Her enthusiasm, hard work, and wealth allowed her to quickly climb the ranks and become a prominent figure in Gauteng's vegan activism scene. With time and money on her side, Helen could afford to keep herself busy with passion projects and hobbies aligned to her newfound notions of what constituted "a good life". Through her activism and business pursuits, she found means through which, she hoped, she could encourage others to live sustainably and to adopt veganism.

Yet there is a thread of fickleness running through Helen's story: Her passion for JCAN and for veganism burned brightly but briefly, echoing the trajectory of her conversion to – and subsequent distancing from – her husband's religion. A more cynical reading of Helen's dwindling interest might be that, like her other fleeting interests and hobbies, her veganism was simply a trendy affectation; a commodity with a limited shelf-life, purchased on a whim and discarded on a whim.

This chapter delves deeper into Helen's attempts to constitute herself as a moral person and a productive member of society. Her role as the organiser of the JCAN is explored in relation to how an international vegan activism movement is transposed into a South African context.

Veganism in Vogue

To paraphrase an old anthropological truism, widely misattributed to Margaret Mead, ethnographic inquiry shows us that what people say, what people do, and what people *say they do* are all quite different things. Helen, I feel, is a particularly striking example of this: In our conversations, she carefully pruned and framed her own biography to centre entirely and exclusively on a lifestyle change she'd made a scant five years before. Helen, aged 57, had thus relegated more than 90% of her time alive to an unmentionable, unrelatable version of herself she called "past me". I therefor take Helen's account of herself seriously, but not always literally: While I believe that Helen's attempts to care for animals and the planet were (for the most part) both sincere and admirable, I am also aware that our encounters were perhaps a site for her to play with and perform a relatively new identity; I am not convinced Helen thanked her leeks as reverently when she was alone as she did in my presence.

In making sense of Helen's sometimes frantic search for meaning, identity, and belonging, I turn to Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity (2000). Bauman (2000) argues that within the current neoliberal late-capitalist moment, people are faced with increasing uncertainty, insecurity, and unsafety. In response to a world in constant flux, people turn to new ways to find meaning, community, and stability. One such way is through consumerism. One can buy into shiny, new identities, shedding old ones without fear or consequence; long-term commitments and responsibilities are replaced by individualistic searches for meaning, experience, and identity:

> Given the intrinsic volatility and unfixity of all or most identities, it is the ability to 'shop around' in the supermarket of identities, the degree of genuine or putative consumer freedom to select one's identity and to hold to it as long as desired, that becomes the royal road to the fulfilment of identity fantasies. Having that ability, one is free to make and unmake identities at will. Or so it seems (Bauman, 2000, p. 83).

Helen's financial situation allowed her to explore many different avenues of creating meaning. When something caught her interest, she could commit to it entirely through buying her way in. Although I had limited insight into Helen's life pre-veganism, what I observed during my fieldwork was quite telling: it seemed that a trail of abandoned passion projects and short-lived interests followed in her wake. The fact that she avoided discussing "past me" at all indicated a complete shedding of her past identity; Helen actively rejected any continuity between her past and present formations of self. Our discussions and my observations revealed some brief glimpses from which we might piece together Helen's pattern of trying on different identities like garments, committing herself fully to a new version of Helen each time, but then shedding it once the demands of her newfound identity or community began to chafe. As Bauman (2001:64) notes, this ability to discard an identity is crucial: "The facility to dispose of an identity the moment it ceases to satisfy, or is deprived of its allure by competition from other and more seductive identities on offer, is far more vital than the 'realism' of the identity currently sought or momentarily appropriated and enjoyed".

An example to demonstrate this is Helen's dedication to Judaism, which was one aspect of "past me" that Helen willingly discussed – largely because I was curious about how she planned to break into the Jewish market to sell her homemade sourdough challah. Swept up in the passion of the newly converted, Helen fully committed herself to the faith. The burning passion then diminished: Not only did she step away from the organising committee, but her attendance at shul also dwindled over time. Later, when a new identity became available – veganism – Helen further strayed from any remaining commitment to Judaism by marking her body with a tattoo.

In continuing to understand Helen's pursuits as emblematic of self-fashioning under liquid modernity, one identity that Helen purchased – at least as I came to know her during fieldwork – was one that was deeply concerned about the environment. Many of her passion projects centred around an endeavour to live a more sustainable life and encouraging others to do the same: the food forest, Farmer Bee's organic produce, eco-friendly sourdough bread delivery, homemade gifts, vegan activism. Helen believed that she was playing her part in healing a "broken food system".

To be clear – undertaking to live more sustainably and environmentally conscious is a noble and necessary endeavour. What is interesting here is the short-sightedness of Helen's good intentions – at times, she seemed oblivious to the implications of her actions and her lifestyle more broadly. Consider, for instance, Helen's "eco-friendly" bread deliveries. Cycling instead of driving to deliver bread might appear sustainable and environmentally friendly, but it should be kept in mind that Helen's *bakfiets* was specially imported from the Netherlands. This raises some uncomfortable questions: How much carbon was generated by Helen choosing to import a brand-new bicycle, and how much would she have to pedal to offset these emissions? What are the environmental implications of frequent travel to America? Was the *bakfiets* an environmentally friendly mode of delivery, or merely a fancy accessory that suited Helen's aesthetic sensibilities? We might interrogate Helen's decision to use synthetic yarn rather than sheep's wool for her crafts along similar lines – while arguably "cruelty-free", synthetic fibres are generally not bio-degradable, which sheep's wool is.

Then there is the small matter of Helen's "sustainable" haven at Willow Creek, where her husband houses his collection of 200 cars and where she nurtures fantasies of "living off the land"; where their foibles and fantasies are sustained by a small army of staff, whose cheap labour forms the foundation of Helen's eco-friendly, "ethical" lifestyle. South Africa's wealthiest 10% – a category which we can safely assume includes Helen and Steven – are responsible for at least 30% of South Africa's carbon emissions (Arndt, et al., 2013). Considering these facts, Helen's well-intentioned refusal to use plastic shopping bags seems to be a tiny drop in the ocean.

My focus here, however, is not to litigate exactly how eco-friendly each of Helen's actions were. Rather, I hope to demonstrate the kind of rocky terrain Helen navigated in constructing herself as a moral person. In her fervent devotion to the cause of veganism and her practices of conspicuous ethical consumption, Helen was able to reconcile – or perhaps merely obfuscate – certain uncomfortable contradictions about her place in the world and to conceive of herself as a good, moral person.

Helen's attempts at buying her way in to the sustainability movement could be construed as a kind of ethical consumerism, through which consumers act in ways they consider to be moral and good by purchasing products that they understand to be in alignment with their values (Jones, 2019). Some scholars maintain that ethical consumerism has potential for meaningful social change, in that it might lead to more direct forms of political engagement (Barnett, et al., 2010).

Carrier (2008) and Luetchford (2016) both point to ethical consumption being an ineffective mechanism at creating social change, due to its neoliberal tendency to frame the economy as the primary platform to act. The authors demonstrate that ethical consumption is an identity making project, both in the consumer understanding themselves to be ethical, and in their signalling of belonging to a certain class: “It may explain part of the ethical construction of the self as a particular kind of concerned consumer, so that ethical consumption reflects and reproduces class and other differences to different degrees. This is so because shoppers have no choice but to negotiate between values objectified in the things that they buy and the relative cost of realizing different values” (Luetchford, 2016, p. 398).

From slaughtering to sweet potatoes

While Helen was preoccupied with the morality of different lifestyle and consumption choices, her aspirations to live ethically were not ultimately bound to the realms of her home(s). Through her activism, her beliefs and ethics were brought into a public arena, where they evidently found themselves in conflict with other people’s beliefs and ethics. Helen took on all JCAN’s leadership roles and was subsequently the intermediary between the organisation, the activists, the institutions, and the public. It was initially Helen’s hopes that the establishment of the JCAN would be an opportunity to “make a positive difference”. CAN’s beliefs aligned well with her own and provided a platform for her to do activism, and thus construe herself as a good person.

The role of organiser came with guidelines that needed to be upheld, most of which I have outlined earlier in this chapter. While Helen adhered to CAN’s formal guidelines, she arguably fell short in terms of the substantive responsibilities of the position. As the organiser, it was Helen’s responsibility to educate the activists on how best to communicate with passersby and slaughterhouse employees; the CAN guidelines encouraged “cultural sensitivity” and urged that posters be printed in local languages. But the responsibility of translating the overarching organisation’s strategy to a contextually appropriate, culturally sensitive, and locally effective form is where Helen fell notably short. Helen seemed to lack the contextual awareness to translate CAN guidelines into a strategy suited to the South African context; her interactions and interventions were often distinctly tone-deaf and out-of-touch.

On one occasion, for example, a slaughterhouse worker asked Helen what she supposed would become of his job if she and her fellow activists succeeded in shutting down the slaughterhouse. Her response was flippant and vague: “The slaughterhouse could just switch to sweet potatoes, or something”.

Helen’s economic standing seemed to create a comfortable distance between her and the other South Africans she interacted with through her animal activism. During vigils, Helen, like the other activists, would preach a kind of veganism to passersby that they deemed to be affordable for working class South Africans: “It is cheaper to buy rice, it is cheaper to buy beans, it’s cheaper to buy a whole 20kg bag of chickpeas. It lasts you longer, easy to cook, quick to cook, you just add your spices… you can still have your ‘*Amorat*’ – *Aromat*, I mean, whatever. It’s not just about “this is cruel, stop eating animals” – give the solution, make it easier.” This was not the kind of veganism that she ascribed to. Helen’s comments reflect a misunderstanding of reality; perhaps a version of reality as seen through rose-tinted designer glasses.

Helen’s wealth put her out of touch with the lived experiences of others, especially those who played audience to JCAN’s vigils. While the other JCAN activists displayed a certain level of ignorance too, the onus was largely on Helen to ensure that these misunderstandings are rectified – if not for anything else, at least for the efficacy of their activism. It is important here to consider how Helen’s own beliefs influence and shape the JCAN, especially given her role as the organiser. Helen seemed to understand that the JCAN’s vigils would have a mostly working-class audience, however, her conceptualisations of a working-class audience held undertones of classist assumptions: “the poor are not interested in climate, the poor are not interested in health. The poor are not interested in the fact that it's cruel. […] They're not interested, you know?" When asked to explain what she meant by this comment, Helen contextualised it by referencing a fictional character, Maria, to clarify her comment:

> It's not just about going and saying, "you need to stop buying this because its cruel". People don't give a shit. Maria is tired when she gets back from work, the last thing she's thinking of is another fucking animal. Maria needs to eat. Maria needs to feed her children so she can get into bed so she can wake up at 5 to feed her children again and get her transport to work to be there for 7. So there just needs to be an elevated, connective consciousness. We [JCAN activists] are conscious of how to solve what we want solved in a way that is comfortable and easy for them [the audience].

Helen felt that the working-class passersby at vigils did not care about animal welfare, climate change, or their health and that of their family's because of their economic situation – to Helen's mind, working-class people had more pressing issues to attend to. Despite this rather crude linkage between poverty and morality, Helen still made no attempt to reframe JCAN's activism to offer workable solutions. It did not matter if people remained poor. What mattered was that they were not eating animals.

To Helen's mind, veganism was not political, and vegan activism should not incorporate other social justice matters. She framed it as keeping her activism "clean". This singular focus is precisely what drove away Talia, a young vegan activist of colour. Talia joined while I was doing fieldwork with JCAN, but soon distanced herself from the organisation, because she felt her beliefs were not in alignment with those of the group's: "I consider myself a very progressive person, and the group doesn't align with my values […] I find some vegans very frustrating, those who are actually conservative in every other sense but support the animal rights movement. You try to make them understand other things and it doesn't sit well."

Upon Talia's departure from the group, Helen commented that her political opinions would have drawn focus away from the animals, and thus disrupted JCAN's efforts.

"The unbearable whiteness of green": The colours of ecological concern

The JCAN's activism under Helen's leadership was largely an uncritical regurgitation of international iterations of animal activism, which was underpinned by Western values and modalities of thought. Helen's bourgeois and disconnected worldview did not bode well for dismantling the idea that veganism in South Africa remains a "white, elitist thing"[17].

Furthermore, within South Africa, conservation efforts and animal welfare-related causes are still considered to be "white issues" and kept within the realms of the middle and upper classes (Burnett 2024, Green 2020, McDonald 2002, Yount-André & Zembe 2023). White people became the self-proclaimed voices of authority on matters pertaining to environmental and animal conservation, framing themselves as knowledgeable protectors, while Black people were portrayed as destructive (Kahn 2002, Koot et al. 2024).

Echoes of these colonial ghosts still linger on today – white South Africans still dominate conservation spaces and as noted in earlier chapters, concern for animal rights is typically associated with whiteness. Conservation efforts and veganism are also matters of class – Green (2020) notes that to visit any of South Africa's national parks comes at a price – prohibitively expensive for many South Africans. Consumable aspects of sustainable living are also largely out of reach for the majority of South Africans, such as organic produce or eco-friendly products, not only due to exorbitant prices but also inaccessibility. Globally, it seems that sustainability is trendy, and the lifestyle has subsequently become commodified. Ethical consumption is by no means the only avenue to combatting climate change, however, most working-class South Africans cannot even afford to choose sustainable commodities. Vegan alternatives – the kind that make the lifestyle pleasant and convenient – are expensive and largely inaccessible. In a South African context, the kind of ethical consumption that Helen portrays is unobtainable.

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[17] A quote taken from an interview with Talia, an activist who was briefly involved with JCAN.

The kind of ethical consumption[18] that Helen engages in is kept within the confines of wealthy South Africans. Helen's practices of ethical consumption are in an attempt to constitute herself as a virtuous individual – at least, she purchases her way into a lifestyle that is portrayed as virtuous. As Luetchford (2016:402) notes:

> …ethical consumption becomes more visible and vocal, and yet more contradictory and contested, as neoliberal globalization advances. This occurs as food provisioning, thought of as ethical, becomes increasingly open to appropriation by market and monetary value. The evidence for this is not only the use of ethical images and ideas by corporations to generate profits, but also that better-off sections of populations and those with educational capital concern themselves about conditions of production and can afford to buy into ideas and images that proffer them some influence over that. What is more, even those people are selective and look for alternatives in certain areas of their lives: food but not mobile phones, for example.

The last sentence of Luetchford's (2016) above quote also points to Helen's rather selective and depoliticised campaigning. Her conspicuous portrayal of an ethical lifestyle is superficial; pulling back the surface layers reveal points of hypocrisy. Again, it is important to note that the intention here is not a finger-pointing exercise, but an attempt to understand how Helen thinks of herself in relation to the world, and how she constructs herself as an ethical person.

The trouble that Carrier (2008) has with ethical consumption is its tendency to perpetuate a neoliberal logic that champions the economy as the only mode of enacting social change, stripping people of collective political agency and reducing them to mere consumers: "The result is the further fragmentation of collectivities into disorganised individuals with their own preferences but without mutual ties or obligations" (2008:47). I am reminded again of Bauman's (2001) concept of the evasive and rapidly changing identities available to people under liquid modernity that are largely absent of long-term commitment and responsibility.

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[18] I use "ethical consumption" in the sense that is found in the prominent literature (Jones 2019, Carrier 2008, Luetchford 2016). Arguably, ethical consumption is context-dependent: local knowledge and understandings of what constitutes as "ethical" need to be considered. Such a discussion would extend beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, Helen's specific practices of ethical consumption are broadly in alignment with those discussed in the existing literature.

This is pertinent in terms of Helen's leadership of the JCAN: the kind of ethical consumption Helen partakes in evinces a belonging to the upper class, deterring potential activists from joining and suggesting to JCAN's audience that veganism is unaffordable.

Let them eat lentils: class and foodways

However, South African foodways are determined and created by more than mere economic factors: aspects such as taste, preference, and symbolic meaning are not to be overlooked. As Kroll (2016:13) demonstrated in his exploration of poor South Africans' foodways, food choices hold symbolic power – conspicuous consumption of foods denote distinction in social values and class: "[…] it is necessary to consider how South Africans use specific foods to talk about poverty and about themselves in relation to wealth and poverty. Food should thus be considered a symbolic asset in the process of class formation and the accumulation of capital". Thus, Helen's conspicuous consumption reveals how her foodways and lifestyle are useful symbolically in signifying her membership to the wealthy class, as well as to signify her ethics pertaining to animals and the environment. Kroll (2016:13) notes that "[f]or the wealthy, buying food from a local organic market denotes concern for social and ecological issues, while for the poor it may denote an exclusionary expense, identifying the purchaser as belonging to an elite which distinguishes itself through conspicuous consumption of foods unattainable by the most of the population".

Bourdieu's (1979) theory of taste proves to be a useful framework here, arguing that taste both determines and is determined by class. Social barriers between (and within) classes are reinforced through taste. The bourgeoisie determine what constitutes "good taste" in society, which in turn shapes lower classes' conceptualisations of the cultural content of upward mobility. In this way, Bourdieu (1979) argues that taste is a social weapon. In Helen's case, this holds true – not only does she belong to a class that has the capacity to determine what is in "good" taste in society, she also quite literally tells people how and what to consume through her activism. Helen's tastes shaped and were shaped by her class position; her wealth allowed her to maintain a "sustainable" vegan lifestyle, which in turn reinforced her class position.

South African literature about foodways suggest that taste is still very much linked to class, and animals-as-food are of particular importance in this arena (Daya 2022, Kroll 2016, Yount-André & Zembe 2023). Given South Africa's history of colonisation and Apartheid, there are still links between class and race. Veganism and vegetarianism are still largely considered to be a "white, elitist thing". The expansion of industrialised agriculture and globalisation resulted in meat becoming more widely accessible, and thus, globally, meat appears to be losing its symbolic association with wealth and class. Plant-based diets subsequently grew in popularity among wealthy classes worldwide, a trend that found its way into South Africa (Yount-André & Zembe, 2023). Despite this global trend towards plant-based diets, Yount-André and Zembe note that within South Africa, many Black South Africans who have been historically excluded from engaging with commodities of modernity still consider animal-based foods to signify wealth and success: "For people of colour – even those considered middle class – efforts to position oneself through meat eating often hinge upon the desire to distance oneself from signs of abject poverty and the humiliation endured during apartheid."

Furthermore, Yount-André and Zembe (2023) observed that plant-based eating tends to be more accepted among white, middle-class South Africans, noting that vegetarians of colour – who often come form historically marginalized families – find their lifestyle to be awkward and embarrassing among their relatives, who regard meat as an important element of kinship, status, and care. This greatly differs from the experiences of my informants, who, for the most part, are catered for and accepted among their friends and family – Helen told me about a party she had recently attended whereby the host made sure that all the champagne was vegan, and ordered a vegan sushi platter so that Helen could feel included.

What this goes to demonstrate is that taste – quite literally, in this sense – still determines and is determined by class in South Africa. Helen's veganism, arguably informed by her class position, also reaffirms her class position – it is a form of cultural (and economic, due to the expensive nature of the kind of vegan lifestyle that Helen adheres to) capital that distinguishes her from lower classes. Her position is powerful in its influence, guiding what is "good" – both in taste and as a type of virtue signalling, living in a way that she constitutes as ethical.

With these factors in mind, Helen's version of veganism made visible to others through her activism, social media, and lifestyle is largely exclusionary to most South Africans. Helen's consumption frames veganism as an exclusive and unobtainable lifestyle, further perpetuating ideas that veganism is a "white, elitist thing". What is more, working class South Africans' inability to buy into these streams of ethical consumption are framed, in Helen's mind at least, as a lack of care or concern for animals, human health, and the environment. Given that Helen's approach to constructing herself as an ethical person is through consumption, it stands to reason that Helen equates wealth to morality[19].

Thus far, I have focused on Helen's role as a consumer, which is in direct opposition to her own intentions and aspirations for her food forest, where she aspires to construct herself as a producer and to reduce her dependency on mainstream food systems. To that, two points must be made, the first being that Helen was still very much a *consumer*. While much of her fresh produce was from the farm, when living in Johannesburg, Helen depended on supermarkets and organic food stores. Secondly, the food forest also functioned as a tool for financial gain. Selling her produce at the local market became the focal point of her food growing. The local market catered to the upper-class consumer, as evidenced by Helen's own admission that the box of produce she gifted me would likely cost me close to R700 if I were to buy from Farmer Bee's stall. In this way, Helen's attempt to buy out of the "broken food system" by creating and taking part in alternative modes of food production was kept within the confines of the wealthy. The focus of Helen's participation in the farmer's market (as well as her other entrepreneurial pursuits) was not to make a living, but rather to construct herself as a productive member of society; one who is engaged in creating a more ethical and vegan world.

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[19] This is more nuanced than is expressed here. As demonstrated earlier, Helen does contextualise her comments about the poor's lack of concern by implying that people who are suffering financially have more pressing issues facing them, for example, whether they can feed themselves or their families. This view, however, is problematic and reproduces dichotomies of whiteness versus Blackness, wealth versus poverty, and environmentalism versus destruction. Many working-class South Africans do care greatly for the environment yet express this care in ways that Helen simply does not recognise, because these modes of care do not have the same monetary values. Poverty is not a mutually exclusive factor from environmentalism, and it is of course possible to belong to the working class and be concerned for the environment – as a wise colleague astutely reminded me, "it is possible to chew gum and walk at the same time".

Similar to Li's (2017) observations about PETA's contextually ignorant vegan activation in Cuba, the cookie-cutter approach is problematic in a South African context: Western vegan activism cannot be uncritically transposed, which raises questions about CAN's pursuit of creating a vegan world. Helen, as the organiser of the JCAN, held a representative role: she was the intermediary between many different actors. While upholding CAN's overarching guidelines, Helen failed to transpose the supposed universal vegan message in a contextually appropriate and relevant way. Li (2017:11-12) notes that an effective approach would involve understanding the context within with the activism is taking place; understanding how different factors may influence people's understandings of meat, food, and animals: "Such an attentiveness necessarily requires a recognition of the ways in which socioeconomic inequities find themselves reflected in, and connected with the space often delimited as cultural difference and aspiration".

Conclusion

Helen's evasive search for meaning, defined by "shopping around" for identities, ultimately led to her becoming a prominent figure in the nascent South African vegan activist movement – however briefly, she succeeded in constructing herself as a good, ethical person, and for a time found community with like-minded people.

This was most readily observed in Helen's leadership of the JCAN – an endeavour that stemmed from a blazing passion of the newly converted. Given Johannesburg's disorganised and small vegan activism community, Helen sought to do more for the animals (and the environment). Her economic position enabled her the monetary and temporal capital to invest into the South African vegan movement. However, as is typical of these short-lived identities borne from liquid modernity, they are void of commitment and easy to shed once the next enticing identity becomes available: "Passions are, after all, notorious for their incurable volatility and the way they shift" (Bauman, 2001, p. 66).

The lack of contextual awareness points to a disconnect – Helen's wealth created distance between herself and the lived realities of most the South Africans that she interacted with through activism. Furthermore, Helen's lifestyle – her tastes and the class position they were mutually constitutive of – further punctuated this distinction.

Globally, members of the middle and upper classes are adopting increasingly plant-based foodways and subsequently vegetarianism and veganism are now associated with affluence. This is complicated in a South African context, however, where meat is still symbolically indicative of wealth and status; meat may feature prominently in patterns of conspicuous consumption and the performance of upward mobility, especially for Black South Africans (Kroll 2016, Yount-André 2023). These factors are overlooked by JCAN, and Helen made no attempt to understand these complexities or shape CAN's activism to incorporate them into a context-aware strategy.

South Africa has diverse understandings of what constitutes ethical conduct, especially pertaining to animals-as-food. Helen's influential leadership role thus runs the risk of perpetuating colonial ideas that frame middle- and upper-class white people as knowledgeable and noble guardians of the environment and animals. Helen's positionality thus reproduces the idea that veganism is a "white, elitist thing", in the words of Talia, the only woman of colour who attended a JCAN during my fieldwork.

To Helen's mind, poorer South Africans are not concerned with the environment or animal wellbeing. She herself, on the other hand, has the economic means to buy into an ethical identity. Although her ethical consumption is at times fraught with hypocrisy and short-sightedness, it is integral to how she constructs herself as an ethical person.

Through her consumption and lifestyle choices, as well as her work with the JCAN, Helen attempted to construct herself as a moral person. Her class position allowed her not only the financial means, but also the time to commit herself fully to the vegan movement – albeit only temporarily. While imperfect, her activism shaped the history of the South African vegan movement. I must stress that my intention for this chapter was not to disparage the attempts of a well-meaning individual to improve the wellbeing of our planet and the animals that inhabit it. Helen's story might be read more sympathetically as that of an earnest individual desperately pursuing meaning and community in an increasingly precarious world.

Chapter 3

Esme: Sanctuary and sacrifice

One October morning, Esme invited me to accompany her and two other directors from Hogs & Hounds Sanctuary, Ricky and Grace, to respond to an urgent request to assist animals in need. The plea had come from a desperate woman, Nicolene, and her husband, Dawie, who had recently been evicted from their home – Dawie lost his leg to diabetes and subsequently lost his job. The couple had over 100 animals in their care: dogs, cats, sheep, cows, pigs, chickens. Dawie and Nicolene were moving to a smaller plot and, despite their dire financial situation, intended to take their animals with them.

Nicolene tearfully admitted that if Hogs & Hounds could not help them in some way, they would have to leave all 100 animals behind. "I love them," she insisted, "but we can't even keep the lights on."

At this point, Hogs & Hounds offered sanctuary to over 300 animals and simply could not accommodate more. Despite the spatial restraints, Esme believed there must be *something* that the team could do. She compelled the other directors to combine their skills to help Nicolene – Grace's cousin had a trailer to transport the animals, Ricky could build shelters, Esme could raise funds to buy food and supplies (for the animals). Loyal Hogs & Hounds' supporters generously donated animal feed, bedding, and money, and Esme's connections paid off, too – a veterinarian contact of hers offered to sterilise all the animals pro bono. Esme suspected this was a case of animal hoarding and thus preventing further breeding was of utmost importance.

I arrived at Hogs & Hounds on the agreed-upon morning. Esme immediately handed me my breakfast (a *naartjie*) and my uniform (a black t-shirt embellished with a bright pink cartoon pig and a slogan: "Hogs & Hounds – a safe haven for abandoned animal friends"). Esme outlined the day's itinerary, which involved assessing the condition of the animals in Nicolene's care, assessing the living situation at the new property, and developing a plan of action to help the animals.

We set off on the hour-and-a-half long journey to Delmas, a farming town in Mpumalanga. "I'm not feeling hopeful about this", Esme said, as we drove through dry, dusty fields on neglected roads. Delmas seemed forgotten-about: the potholes were plentiful and deep, the town's buildings in a state of disrepair, rubbish bins were overflowing, and posters of smiling politicians from elections gone-by had faded in the harsh sun.

Nicolene, a tall, slender woman with holes in her shoes, welcomed us to their new (rental) home– a smallholding on the outskirts of town. Nicolene and Dawie would be sharing the property with about 30 other renters, who occupied caravans, wooden sheds, and shacks that were spread across the land. "It's not even legal," Esme muttered under her breath. As Nicolene showed us around, I sensed a growing tension among the directors. Esme, Ricky, and Grace whispered concerns to one other whenever Nicolene's back was turned:

"There's no grazing space!"

"Look there – rats."

"Did you see the dead ducks? And all the rubbish?"

"The renters are all Blacks. This is no place for so many animals".

We navigated the property as Nicolene detailed her intentions: "*Oupa* [a pig] can live here, and over there we can put *Pretty* and the other girls [horses] …" Esme kicked at the rubbish by her feet – alcohol cans, cough syrup bottles, *amasi*[20] containers, empty cans of baby formula.

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[20] *Amasi* is a fermented, thick milk product that is a staple food item in many South African households.

> Grace tried unsuccessfully to hide her tears. Ricky requested to see the house that Nicolene, Dawie, and their 53 cats would be residing in. The building appeared to be the main house on the property – it was certainly the largest and looked the most structurally sound. The house's mostly shattered windows were covered from the inside by plastic sheets. It became difficult to ignore the piles of empty pool acid containers, one of which Ricky tripped over, subsequently knocking over a mound of empty beer and whiskey bottles, also populating the house's perimeter.
>
> Nicolene, who was still leading the pack, turned around to us and giggled, "Sorry, I can't take you inside the house yet. The guy has still got his mandrax[21] tent up, they make it in there".
>
> Our tour was cut short by the arrival of Jeff, the owner of the property, whose black BMW emerged from a plume of red dust. Jeff, a short man in a fedora and blazer, warmly introduced himself to us. We learned that Jeff and his family wanted to return to Zimbabwe amidst an increase in xenophobic sentiment in South Africa. He owned a mine in Zimbabwe and felt that the prospects were brighter there. Jeff pointed to two large, unwalled sheds on our left, both with huge piles of fine black dust lying on top of plastic sheets. "It's getting dangerous here now, with the gold mining," he said. Nicolene interjected: "he's a *zama zama*[22] boss here".
>
> Esme became distracted by grunts and squeals emanating from a small, haphazardly built shed: Pigs – a pregnant mother and her two tiny piglets. Esme interrupted the conversation with Jeff to call the other directors over. At the site of the pigs, Grace gagged and let out small sobs. The pigs were Jeff's, and he intended to take them to auction before his move back to Zimbabwe: "Unless you want to buy them?"
>
> After some debate, the directors agreed to buy the pigs – a practice they would usually discourage for fear of "encouraging" the seller to buy more pigs and perpetuate the cycle. But here, they felt the situation was dire. Esme's assessment of the pigs was that they were malnourished, under extreme psychological distress, and that their living conditions were inadequate – "when last was the water changed? There's mould and algae. They don't have sun, or grass – what have they been eating? *Mielie* cobs? She can't even roll over…"
>
> Grace crouched down, resting her head against the corrugated iron exterior of the shed. Her shoulders shook as she wept: "I'm so sorry mama. Oh God, I'm sorry." I kneeled beside her and held her hand in a gesture of comfort. I admit, with some strange shame, that I shed a few tears, too. I was supposed to strive to be objective and detached for the sake of anthropological rigour, but the suffering we had witnessed that day infiltrated the protective layer of attempted impartiality/neutrality.
>
> The hour-and-a-half drive back to the sanctuary passed mostly in silence. On returning, Esme entered one of the pig pens, greeted by 30 of the sanctuary's rescues who were eager to see her. She lay down on the grass and she was joined by her porcine friends who lay down around her and on top of her. For the first time that day, I saw Esme cry.

The following chapter focuses on Esme, one of the three activists central to JCAN. Many of our interviews were conducted over cups of tea in her lounge, surrounded by curious snouts and wet noses – Esme had, years before, transformed her home into a sanctuary for rescued dogs and pigs. Her door remained open to all the sanctuary's animal residents, allowing them to come and go as they please. It was clear that they ruled the roost, and often our interviews would proceed with dogs and pigs all clamouring for a seat on a lap, or a spot on a couch.

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[21] Known as Quaaludes in the United States and some parts of Europe, this is a highly addictive drug that depresses the central nervous system. It is illegal in South Africa.

[22] *Zama zamas* (meaning "to keep trying" or "to gamble") are illegal artisanal miners, usually migrant labourers, who descend into South Africa's dangerous, abandoned gold mines in the hopes of finding something of value.

Esme's house was modest, messy, sparsely furnished, and undecorated, aside from the odd pig-themed ornament or painting. She spoke openly about the sacrifices she had made to ensure Hogs & Hounds ran smoothly; a washing machine, dishwasher, television, and even hot water were luxuries that Esme simply could not afford. After realising that running the sanctuary would be a full-time job, Esme had resigned from her position as a floor manager at a nearby casino. Her golden name tag still hung proudly on her fridge, now partially obscured by pictures of pigs, vet bills, and animal-themed magnets. Esme was no stranger to financial struggles, and evidence of her limited means was all around: the damaged bakkie she couldn't afford to fix, the frequent illnesses she couldn't afford to treat, and the old, tattered clothes she couldn't afford to replace.

Besides being a drain on her finances, the sanctuary also took a toll on Esme's emotional well-being – she frequently encountered neglected, abused, and suffering animals. Much of her free time was dedicated to vegan activism, most notably attending JCAN vigils, during which she bore witness to truckloads of pigs destined for the slaughterhouse. Esme often spoke of her depression and hopelessness about the fates of animals in South Africa; at times, the weight of their suffering made day-to-day life unbearable for her. Paradoxically, it was also the suffering of animals that kept her going: "They [the animals] make me want to crawl into bed and never wake up, but they're also what gets me up in the morning. I have to keep going, for them."

Esme's social life outside of the sanctuary and her activism was virtually non-existent. She mostly preferred the company of the pigs over the company of humans, and she did not wish to "waste [her] time" socialising with people who didn't share her vegan values.

At first glance, Esme's choices might seem absurdly masochistic – leaving behind a relatively comfortable life for a mission defined by suffering, heartbreak, austerity, and hopelessness – but she had found meaning and purpose in committing her life to something greater than herself. Fortunately, she'd also found solace in JCAN. She and fellow activist Louis had formed a strong friendship, cemented over the tears, laughter, gossip and bottles of wine they often shared at post-vigil meetups. While the "Hogs & Hounds family"[23] held regular social gatherings, Esme rarely attended. It seemed that reclusiveness was the rule for Esme, rather than the exception – though ostensibly this had not always been the case.

She often described herself as "jaded". Esme ascribed her dim view of humanity to her staunch veganism, to the pressure of running a sanctuary with over 300 animal residents, and to her first-hand experiences of human cruelty towards animals. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Esme had initially been somewhat guarded in our conversations, and it was only after numerous visits and vigils that she began to tell me her story.

Remembering "Rhodesia"

Esme was born in Mangula – a dusty, sparsely-populated copper-mining town, in what was at the time Rhodesia[24] – in the late 1960s. Her father was in middle management on the mines. Her mother was a homemaker with an abiding passion for gardening; Esme remembers her early childhood fondly, as a green oasis amidst the red dust.

When Esme was nine years old, her mother died of cancer. Her father declined into alcoholism soon after, and Esme's fond memories came to an end.

As the youngest of three, Esme spent her adolescence in her older sisters' shadows – they were sporty and had good grades, and Esme never quite met the high standards they set.

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[23] As will be discussed later, "The Hogs & Hounds Family" included the sanctuary's other directors, the volunteers, and their families, but not the sanctuary's paid workers.

[24] Esme still made use of the term Rhodesia, rather than Zimbabwe.

When her father tried to send her to the same boarding school as her sisters, Esme threatened to kill herself – she preferred to stay in Mangula, where she had a few boyfriends to keep her busy.

Love, war

At 17, Esme fell in love with a French soldier – Henry – who was fighting in the Rhodesian Bush War as a volunteer. Distracted by her concern for his safety, Esme almost didn't make it to graduation – but she managed to scrape by with a bare pass.

After the war, in 1979, Esme moved to France with Henry, where she sold children's clothes and he "worked for the military, or something", according to Esme. They eventually ended up in Paris, where Esme couldn't find work but didn't mind much: She spent her days reading, visiting museums, learning French cooking from Henry's mother – and walking around Paris with her newly adopted dog, Beau. Once, while Esme and Beau were wandering through the red-light district, a man flashed Esme while yelling: "Do you want a piece of this?". Esme replied, "Do you want a piece of *this*?" and promptly pepper-sprayed him in the eyes – Beau, for his part, bit him in the leg. Esme shrugged as she told me this story: "Big city life, I guess".

Henry, at this point, had left his ill-defined military job to work as a security guard for Giscard d'Estaing, Jacques Chirac, and other right-wing political figures. Through Henry, Esme soon got involved with right-wing political activism. Mostly, she campaigned for Chirac by participating in clandestine nighttime poster-pasting battles against "the communists"[25]. Whichever side's posters were most intact and visible when Paris awoke had won the night's battle. Having grown up as a white Rhodesian during the Bush War – who then moved to

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[25] Esme never specified who "the communists" in question were, but from the context and timing, we might reasonably assume that she was referring to the *Parti Socialiste* – the social democrats whose candidate ultimately defeated d'Estaing in the 1981 Presidential election, after Chirac split the centre-right vote.

Europe during the Cold War – Esme's impassioned hatred of "communism" was, perhaps, inevitable.

Cha-ching: the South African Casino Scene

After 7 years together in France, Esme and Henry broke up. Esme needed to go home, but considering the dramatic changes to the political landscape in Rhodesia, by then Zimbabwe, "home" was a tenuous concept. Her older sisters were both working in South African casinos at the time, and scrambled to make a similar arrangement for her, eventually finding Esme a job at Sun City[26]. Esme initially found life in South Africa challenging – she was bitter, broken-hearted, and had no affinity to this new, unfamiliar place. That changed once she started working at Sun City. There, Esme mingled with "young, beautiful, and vibrant" hospitality workers and entertainers. It was during this time that Esme also met and fell in love with Ben, the man she later married.

The work was exhausting, the hours were long, and the guests were drunk and obnoxious; Esme and the other employees worked hard. But they knew how to play hard, too. The staff spent their off days lazing by the topless pool, drinking and dancing at the bars, and making use of the sporting facilities. They would prank one another, show up to their shifts with aggressive hangovers, and sneak around to visit the bungalows of other staff members. Finally, Esme felt a sense of belonging. Sun City held some of Esme's favourite memories. She feared that she "might never be that happy and free again".

Esme left Sun City to work as a dealer in the illegal gambling scene, an aspect of her life she refused to elaborate on. Thereafter, she joined another large casino group and worked in various positions in casinos around the country. Esme worked her way up to floor manager, a position she maintained until 2018. Esme resigned as floor manager to focus on a far more demanding and far less materially rewarding position – running an animal sanctuary.

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[26] A popular resort and casino located in the North West province of South Africa. Initially located in the Bantustan of *Bophuthatswana*, a state independent of Apartheid South Africa, the casino became a popular weekend-getaway destination for (mostly) white people from Johannesburg and Pretoria. Sun City offered patrons experiences that were banned under the Apartheid government, such as gambling, Burlesque shows, nudity, and a subversion of international sporting and cultural boycotts of South Africa.

The Animal Turn

Hogs & Hounds officially became a non-profit organisation in 2011[27], but Esme traced its history back to 2004, when Ben bought Esme a piglet at Christmastime. The couple were both animal lovers and shared a dream of owning a property large enough to house all kind of animals. Winston, Esme's Christmas piglet, was the first addition to what would later become a vast multispecies family.

Throughout the early aughts, Ben and Esme supported animal rescue and welfare organisations as much as they could. They fostered dogs for Dog Rescue and Homing (or DRAH), to relieve some of the organisation's financial burden and spatial constraints, but parted ways after learning of DRAH's malpractice and mismanagement. It was "an absolutely nasty place", and so the couple began rehabilitating and rehoming dogs independently.

They fell in love with the work, and Esme and Ben successfully rehomed more than 1000 dogs over the next few years. At any given time, there were around 70 dogs in their care. Both still employed full-time to fund their passion project, Esme and Ben brought puppies along to work to bottle-feed and supervise them. They self-funded all of it, sacrificing both time and material comforts: "It was unbelievable what we went through".

The couple raised Winston the piglet in the same manner as they did the foster dogs, immersing him in the domestic pack. With no experience rearing pigs, Winston was a challenge, but they were committed to giving him a full and happy life[28], and learned all they could through self-study. Soon, the word about Esme's improvised, self-taught pig expertise had spread, and people were approaching her about pigs in all manner of dire situations, asking for help. The more pigs the couple took in, the further the word spread – soon, they were inundated with requests. They took a leap of faith, moving to a larger property and officially launching Hogs & Hounds:

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[27] While the process of becoming a registered NPO is usually complicated and lengthy, Esme "knew someone who knew someone" who was able to expedite things.

[28] At the time of writing, Winston is well and enjoying his retirement at Hogs & Hounds.

> It was hard in the beginning – we didn't have much support, we didn't know what we were doing… we didn't have a business plan, none of those things. We just came into it because we loved animals, so we struggled hey, we really struggled. Ben and I both maxed out our credit cards; got involved in revolving credit… We're both still paying everything off today.

The work proved to be incredibly demanding – Esme quit her job, committing herself entirely to their cause; Ben continued to work to ensure a steady stream of income. Initially, Esme had only the help of Lawrence, their gardener. The two would work from the crack of dawn, until late at night – all of their waking hours spent providing hands-on, individualised care to a growing number of porcine residents. Esme devoted herself to learning as much as she could about caring for pigs, but most of the information she could find was geared towards raising pigs for slaughter. She thus learned most of what she knows on the fly, by living with these animals and carefully observing them. The more Esme understood pigs, the more she grew to love them.

Venturing into Veganism

Winston changed Esme's attitudes towards food. Knowing the piglet as an intelligent being, capable of complex emotions and behaviours, she could no longer eat pork without sparing a thought for the similarly intelligent, unique individual on her plate. Working in pig rescue, she encountered cruelties inflicted specifically in service of meat-eating: pigs so overfed that they couldn't stand; pigs living in abject but cost-effective conditions; pigs who flung themselves from trucks en route to the slaughterhouse.

Starting in 2006, Esme gradually cut out animal products, before fully committing to veganism in 2016. Despite being acutely aware of animal suffering, Esme struggled to quit meat cold turkey. Animal products were deeply ingrained into her daily life, and Esme had very little time to cook creative and nutritious vegan meals. Meat-eating was also an important part of many of traditions and celebrations that Esme enjoyed; Christmas, Easter, and family birthdays were difficult to navigate as a vegan, and Esme often found herself partaking in animal-based food on these occasions simply because she could not conceive of viable alternatives.

Food played a central role in Esme's story – from experimenting with new cuisines in Europe to fine dining experiences at various casinos, Esme gave notable mention to memorable meals and dishes. Her eyes seemed to glisten as she told me about her favourite Russian restaurant in Paris, or about her trip to New York with Henry, where the food was "[Served in] huge portions and full of the bad stuff – but so tasty!"

Esme's passion for palatal pleasure took a back seat when she started Hogs & Hounds – not due to the supposedly restrictive nature of a vegan diet, but because of the financial restraints of sanctuary life. Despite reminiscing fondly about her past culinary adventures, Esme said she now found meat disgusting. Occasionally, Esme faced challenges – watching dear friends partake in delicious meals, missing out on convenient and quick takeaways, feeling the odd craving for cheese – but despite these obstacles, Esme's commitment to veganism was unwavering. The animals – those with whom she shared her home as well as the countless, nameless individuals she would never meet – were at the heart of her decision-making. Esme's conscience was clear, and she felt as if she was "walking the talk".

But, to her profound disappointment, Esme found that the other directors of the sanctuary were less willing to "walk the talk"; they continued to consume animal products. The difference in values pertaining to eating animal products was a point of contestation within the sanctuary. Esme struggled to understand how people who were committed to rescuing pigs – and sometimes rescued pigs specifically from being slaughtered for food – could still eat meat. Despite this different in values, Esme maintained a civil working relationship with the other directors, largely because they were integral to the financing of the sanctuary. Esme often expressed her frustrations with the other directors, but could not part ways with them because, in her words, “money talks”.

Esme’s eccentric story speaks to themes surrounding whiteness in postcolonial Southern Africa, identity and belonging – brought to the fore by Esme’s unique configuration of relating to (and living with) nonhuman animals.

In the ethnographic extract above, one of the most striking components is Esme’s quiet willingness to compromise her own comfort and safety for the sake of the pigs she feels need her help. This chapter will investigate how and why she has dedicated her life to these animals because of what they mean to her; as well as how her worldview has been shaped and defined by the nonhuman animals with whom she spends her time. Not only do her relationships with pigs inform her lifestyle, but these connections are also central to how she views and interacts with other people; ascribing value-laden judgements based on their treatment of animals.

This chapter shows another configuration of animals’ complicated entanglements in human life. As we shall see, animals are active agents in Esme’s meaning-making. Through her care and stewardship of pigs and animals, Esme constructs herself as a moral person and a productive member of South African society; thus she is able to legitimise her belonging in postcolonial Southern Africa. In so doing, however, Esme inadvertently reproduces colonially informed racial hierarchies.

Hogs & Hounds: A brief overview

Located on a farm about an hour from Pretoria, Hogs & Hounds was home to over 300 pigs, as well as dogs, cats, sheep, and cows. The sanctuary was divided into 'camps' that each housed several animals. The animals were divided up based on factors pertaining to their temperaments – whether they lived amicably with other animals in the camp, or whether they need more supervision (which was usually the case for sickly, older pigs or pigs recovering from injuries or surgeries). Pigs with mischievous temperaments were also placed in pens where they could be monitored.

The division of the animals was a dynamic process done nearly daily, and the designation was done solely by the directors. James and Pieterse (2021:13) describe a similar process that took place at another farm sanctuary in South Africa, noting that "this flux represents attempts to maintain the status quo on a long-term basis and efforts to keep animals 'happy and healthy'". Esme ideally wanted the animals to roam freely, however, division was a necessary process to ensure the animals prone to conflict were separated, and that each pig was correctly fed. The separation of individual animals was thus done for the greater good of all the residents in the sanctuary, as has been observed elsewhere (Abrell, 2021).

Esme was one of four directors. Each director had a different role with varying degrees of involvement in terms of finances, assisting with rescues and home checks, as well as the hands-on, day-to-day care necessary to sustain a sanctuary. Most of the sanctuary's manual labour was done by workers employed by the directors. The workers were Black, while the directors were white. The workers' duties included cleaning the pens and camps daily, feeding the pigs and filling water troughs, cleaning the houses of the directors who stayed on the property, as well as maintenance done on the property.

Workers were expected to "keep an eye" on the pigs and report back to the directors should they noticed something was amiss. All the workers and three of the directors resided on the sanctuary property. Ricky and Grace lived together in the largest house on the property. Esme lived in a modest, two-bedroom house by herself. Both houses' doors were always open to the sanctuary's nonhuman residents. It was not uncommon to see pigs, dogs, chickens, and even an ostrich chick move in and out of these spaces at their leisure. Grace and Ricky's enclosed patio space was covered with mattresses and blankets and served as a recovery ward of sorts for ailing pigs and dogs. Esme's home was a constant flurry of activity of animals moving in and out.

At Hogs & Hounds, the sanctuary advocated for the "pack" rehabilitation method, allowing dogs and other companion animals such as pigs to learn from one another, with human guidance. Living among the pigs at the sanctuary demonstrates the level of commitment the directors had to the nonhuman residents, allowing insight into how these animals exist in their social imaginations and shape their lives. The sanctuary was financed predominantly through the directors' own financial inputs and donations from the public[29]. Donations were infrequent and inconsistent, leaving the sanctuary struggling monthly, as Esme described: "Every month, we wonder how we're going to feed all these animals. And yet, somehow, every month we do. By the skin of our teeth".

South Africans have varied interactions with pigs, the most common being the purchase and consumption of pig flesh from grocery stores. Beyond that, people who interact with living pigs tend to be those involved in pork production (farmers from both subsistence and commercial spheres, and those involved in the raising, transport, and slaughtering of these animals). Outside of these relations, only a few other spaces allow for human-pig interactions, such as petting zoos or farms. However, these differ from sanctuaries as they are developed on the premise of entertainment for humans, whereas sanctuaries oppose animal exploitation in all forms, including entertainment (Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, 2013). Rarer still are people who keep pigs as pets, and whilst the demand for pigs as pets appears to be growing (according to Esme), it is still a relatively small market.

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[29] Previously, Grace and Ricky had owned a restaurant in Pretoria, and used the profits to help fund the sanctuary. Unfortunately, the business folded during the pandemic, and the couple relied largely on Ricky's wages from the butchery to get by – and Grace ran a small online shop to raise funds for the sanctuary.

Hogs & Hounds, by way of Esme, created a space for different, extra-ordinary encounters and allowed the conceptualisation of new ways for South Africans to interact with pigs. They did so in a variety of ways. Their biggest public reach was through their social media profiles on various platforms. Through pictures and videos thought to showcase the pigs' intelligence, gentleness, playfulness, and curiosity, the sanctuary hoped to evoke empathy and compassion from their followers.

Beyond online platforms, the sanctuary was open to visitors by appointment only, to ensure that there was a sanctuary representative present to oversee interactions between visitors and the pigs. Hogs & Hounds also occasionally hosted open days, inviting the public to bring fruit and vegetables and visit the pigs for brushes and belly rubs. In doing so, the sanctuary hoped to foster a renewed sense of empathy within the visitors, enabling them to reconceptualise their preconceived ideas of pigs. Ideally, the open days would break down stereotypes about pigs (for example, that they are dirty), and allow room for the blossoming of new relations to take place between humans and pigs.

Sanctuaries create a unique space for interspecies interaction and engagement, as argued by Abrell (2021), be it with human and nonhuman animal interactions or among the different species living in the sanctuary – "All our pigs are free roaming, constantly interacting with us and each other". Furthermore, through these interactions, the directors hoped that more South Africans would come to understand and relate to pigs differently; be it through a change of dietary habits, by donating to sanctuaries, by advocating for improved welfare for pigs, or through encouraging people to do as Hogs & Hounds have done and develop spaces of care and sanctuary for these animals.

These sentiments reflect those expressed in Abrell’s (2021) ethnography of sanctuaries, where sanctuaries are shown to not only provide solace for a few individual animals, but also to serve as fertile sites for reconceptualising human-animal relationships and multispecies modes of living-with. This resonates with James & Pieterse’s (2021) work on Raine’s Animal Sanctuary, where the sanctuary is understood as modelling a certain ideal of how humans and animals might live together; a kind of utopian prototype for human-animal co-existence. Like Raine’s sanctuary, Hogs & Hounds was a concerted, ongoing effort to model an “ideal social order” (James & Pieterse, 2021).

In terms of how pigs fit into the worldviews and social imaginations of South Africans, I would argue that the very existence of organisations like Hogs & Hounds challenge dominant and normative ways of conceptualising animals-as-food. The sanctuary had two primary goals: to educate the public about how human lifestyle choices impact pigs as sentient beings, and advising pig owners as to how they might ensure a long and loving “mutual companionship” with the pigs in their care. Hogs & Hounds’ very existence invites people to question why farmed animal sanctuaries operate, and, subsequently, to question their own relationship with pigs – at least, this was what Esme hoped the sanctuary would achieve: “We want members of the public to see, ‘Hang on, this pig needed to be rescued from a situation I paid for – the pigs are being rescued from *me*’”.

SA-nctuary: Sanctuary in a South African context

There are many iterations of relations that people might have with pigs in a South African context, be it through food and the production thereof, ownership[30], or companionship.

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[30] Legally speaking, pigs are property in South Africa.

Reflecting the fact that Hogs & Hounds arose from South Africans' varied connections to pigs – from South Africans eating them, rearing them, or keeping them as companion animals – the porcine individuals I met during fieldwork were rescued from slaughter, neglect, or surrendered to the sanctuary due to complications in companionate relations. The animals' paths to Hogs & Hounds were thus shaped by human-pig interactions – and importantly, human-pig interactions that the sanctuary directors considered cruel, neglectful, or otherwise harmful to pigs, and thus morally unacceptable.

At the sanctuary, human-animal relations were shaped by the directors' pursuit of an ideal model of how humans and animals should co-exist, a dynamic that has been observed in South African animal sanctuaries elsewhere (James & Pieterse, 2021). At Hogs & Hounds, the "ideal" relationship, exemplified by Esme's relationship to the pigs, was one that would allow the pigs to live as agentively as possible – albeit within the constraints of a sanctuary where humans determined the content of their diet, restricted their freedom of movement through fenced-in camps, and prevented pig-on-pig conflict by segregating pigs prone to fighting one another. While these interventions were seen as vital for pigs' wellbeing and the sanctuary's day-to-day functioning, it is undeniable that they constituted significant constraints on the agency of animal individuals, as has been argued is generally the case for animal sanctuaries (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011).

One of the sanctuary's core principles was allowing each animal resident to live as natural a life as possible, and the directors envisioned humans living amongst pigs and other rescued animals to be "natural". In Hogs & Hounds' case, this was realised through humans sharing living spaces with animals, which arguably enabled "co-citizenship" (Donaldson & Kymlicka 2011, Abrell 2021) to form between humans and animals, reflecting Esme's conception of the ideal multispecies world.

The notion of human-animal co-citizenship in sanctuary contexts is critiqued by Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011), who point out that animals are not afforded agency to live according to their own desires and needs. Abrell (2021:149), in contrast, provides a more sympathetic reading, arguing that sanctuaries are nonetheless spaces that allow for "…multispecies communities of co-citizens working through the challenges of balancing animals' physical and emotional well-being under conditions of captivity". Abrell (2021:152) refers to people working at sanctuaries as "sacrificial citizens" to capture the great personal sacrifices they make for the sake of their animal residents and in support of the mission of sanctuaries; they "…care for other animals because they care *about* other animals".

This "sacrificial citizenship" is complicated in a South African context, however. The workers at the sanctuary were not drawn to Hogs & Hounds by an affinity to the organisation's cause, but rather by economic necessity. As one worker at Hogs & Hounds – Adam – put it: "No-one likes cleaning up shit – but it's a job, you know?" South Africa's troubled socio-economic situation forces many South Africans like Adam to choose between unemployment and taking undesirable, low-paying jobs (Mutandiro, 2019). Moreover, high unemployment rates disproportionately affect Black South Africans (Cowling, 2023), and Black South Africans are overrepresented in the most low-paying jobs (Gradín, 2019). The legacy of Apartheid, in conjunction with deepening wealth inequality, thus furnishes Hogs & Hounds with a supply of cheap Black labour – a significant contrast to the more volunteer-centred American sanctuaries where Abrell found his "sacrificial citizens".

Initially, Esme had done the undesirable jobs (such as "cleaning up shit") herself, but as Hogs & Hounds grew, she and the other directors distanced themselves from these tasks, focusing on other facets of sanctuary life while relegating the bulk of the manual labour to employees. Esme, the most "hands-on" of the directors, only did undesirable jobs when the workforce was under extreme pressure or when she felt they were underperforming. In the latter situations, Esme often cast herself as better equipped and more competent than her employees; she seemingly felt that she was more knowledgeable and more caring, and seemed to consistently underestimate the labourers' abilities.

While the workers at Hogs & Hounds viewed their employment mostly as a way to make ends meet – rather than a sacrifice for the betterment of porcine lives in South Africa – these primarily economic motivations did not necessarily preclude labourers forming relationships with the pigs. They were, however, often denied the opportunity to do so by the directors at the sanctuary. The prevention of potential co-citizenship between the employees and the pigs was, for instance, reflected in the division of labour: The workers did most of the manual labour at the sanctuary, but were restricted to tasks that involved little to no direct interaction with the animals (besides the occasional manoeuvring and shooing) – tasks such as cleaning the camps, changing water troughs, feeding the pigs, and maintaining the grounds.

The directors assumed that labourers would not *want* to spend time with the pigs beyond their work duties – as Esme put it: "For them, it's just a job. It's not like they want to make friends with the pigs". Once, a worker named Ed walked through the pigs' camps on his day off, looking relaxed and eating an apple. Grace and Esme watched Ed intently, frowning. Grace whispered: "What's he doing in there now?" Helen shrugged in response: "He's not got a rake with him…" The directors continued watching, and could not seem to understand why Ed would be spending his off day in the camps – and it seemed impossible to them that he simply wanted to spend time with the pigs.

The directors generally kept a watchful eye on the workers and often followed them as they attended to their duties within the camps. As was the case with Ed, workers were treated with suspicion when they were seen in a camp while not attending to one of their assigned tasks.

It seems that only the directors, volunteers, and visitors were encouraged, allowed, and trusted to connect with the pigs beyond merely performing the tasks necessary to keep them alive and healthy. Ways of connecting with the pigs included sitting with the pigs in the camps, stroking, brushing, and grooming the pigs, playing with them, or talking to them. Esme thought that the directors, volunteers, and visitors had good intentions; they wanted to spend time with the pigs and were not being paid to do so.

The mistrust of the labourers was most often expressed and discussed between directors. When addressing the labourers directly, mistrust seemed to manifest by means of intensive questioning or reprimands. Despite relying on the labourers' work so that they may focus on other tasks necessary to keep the sanctuary running, the directors felt that the labourers did not care *about* the pigs as much as they did, supposedly leading to inadequate care *for* the pigs. Esme expressed concern that inadequate care would result in pigs becoming ill, over- or under-eating, or that the labourers might hurt the pigs.

I surmised that the mistrust expressed by Esme spoke to her perception of Black people's treatment of animals, likely arising from lingering colonial mentalities that assume that Black people are cruel towards animals (Suzuki, 2017; Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2020). One incident that highlighted this tension centred on of the sanctuary's nonhuman residents, Lucky the rooster. Lucky was "rescued from" the sanctuary workers, who had brought the rooster onto the sanctuary grounds to slaughter and eat. Esme referred to the act as "barbaric". Esme described how she saw the workers "swinging him [Lucky] by his feet" as they carried him. Although Esme and the other directors did not explicitly police what the workers ate, they found it "outrageous" that the workers thought to slaughter and eat a chicken on the premises.

Esme was the only vegan sanctuary director, meaning that animal products were being consumed by the other directors on the property. The non-vegan eating practices of the other directors upset Esme; however, she never prevented them from eating meat and had certainly never referred to *their* meat eating as “outrageous” or “barbaric”.

During my fieldwork, Esme introduced me to most of the sanctuary’s nonhuman residents and told me their rescue stories. Many of the animals were rescued from situations where they were to be slaughtered and eaten by humans. Of these incidences, Esme made a point of informing me of which animals were rescued from “Black areas” where these animals would have been “ritually killed”. Esme shared stories about witnessing Black people slaughtering animals for ritual purposes and told me that the animals suffered “in the most unimaginable ways”.

While Esme’s criticism of ritual slaughter came from a specifically vegan perspective, it is interesting to note the striking similarities to non-vegan, meat-eating white South Africans decrying ritual slaughter as inhumane, cruel, and “barbaric” (Spiegel, 2020). White South African’s outrage at ritual animal slaughter is often underpinned by – and in turn reinforces – racism, as Suzuki’s (2017:129) work would suggest: “Masquerading under the guise of concern for animal welfare, xenophobia and racism thus find a convenient entrée into public discourses where they might otherwise not be tolerated”.

During one post-vigil meetup, JCAN activists were joined by Jane – South African director of a prominent international animal protection organisation. While discussing plans to transform local food systems to plant-based alternatives, Jane mentioned, as an aside, the steady emergence of Black farmers in the post-Apartheid context. Esme responded with stories of her interactions with Black farmers, when the Hogs & Hounds team were called upon to rescue neglected pigs. Based on her experience, she told us, Black farmers were particularly cruel to animals.

Despite Jane's attempts to then convince the table that the maltreatment of animals was not related to race, the white activists agreed with Esme, and pitched in with their own anecdotes. Esme explained that she had seen many pigs rescued from townships, and had witnessed how "horrifically" pigs were treated by "township people". The activists then turned to a recent local news item: a truck carrying chickens had overturned, and passersby – Black, Esme emphasised – were seen "stealing" the live chickens. Esme called this as an "act of savagery".

Given the reality of food insecurity in South Africa, one might speculate that the chickens were taken out of desperation, but Esme did not entertain any sympathetic readings of the event at all. These chickens were, moreover, already headed to the slaughterhouse. Esme's stance seemed to be that the mechanised, orderly killing of chickens by the meat industry was preferential to the domestic killing of chickens by Black people who hadn't paid for them. As a staunch vegan, Esme condemned all killing of animals for human consumption, but here we see that she condemned some killings far more vociferously than others.

This rhymes, oddly, with White's (2011) discussion of the distinction some South Africans make between "chickens of Zuluness" and "chickens of whiteness". Esme, in preferring the chickens to die in a slaughterhouse rather than the home of a Black person, is perhaps really revealing a preference for one way of organising human life over another, distinguishing between different "patterns of social connection and disconnection" (White, 2011, p. 104). Esme thus revealed preferences for, firstly, the primacy of property rights over all other concerns, and secondly, "civilization" over "savagery" – even when "civilization" is in the guise of the slaughterhouse; that industrial death-factory she so abhorred. Here, "savagery" seemed to mean opportunism, or the willingness and ability to slaughter a chicken at home – or just Blackness itself.

Esme's paradoxical preference for the slaughterhouse is also echoed, I believe, in JCAN. CAN targets the "animal industrial complex"[31] and sets its strategy accordingly. In America and the United Kingdom, to draw upon examples of two "strong" CAN branches, the animal industrial complex dominates the killing of animals for consumption completely, and slaughter is completely hidden from the public. This makes the target for CAN's activism clear and renders the strategy of "bearing witness" effective and moving. In contrast, in South Africa, there are accepted alternatives to industrial slaughter in the form of domestic slaughter, sacrificial slaughter, game hunting, and so on. This frustrates JCAN's activism, as the standard CAN strategy fails to account for South Africans' differently patterned relationships with animals and their deaths.

Vigils at slaughterhouses, moreover, allow JCAN activists like Esme to imagine that South Africans would change their habits if only they were privy to the grim realities of slaughter. The slaughterhouse is thus the place where meat is produced for those consumers Esme imagines as capable of being convinced; for those who consume meat slaughtered by others but would likely be too squeamish to do the killing themselves.

Although Esme eschewed all configurations of animals-as-food, we can see here how there how her slight preference of slaughterhouse killing is perhaps informed by colonially informed ideas about what is civilised and uncivilised. As demonstrated earlier, colonialism gave rise to ideas that associated whiteness with progress, civilisation, and modernity.

The above section highlights the complexities of attempting to pursue a vegan movement in a South African context. The racialised division of labour at the sanctuary clearly demonstrates the deep inequalities that persist in post-Apartheid South Africa. Additionally, the mistrust and suspicion directed at the sanctuary's Black labourers demonstrated how colonially established racial prejudices still underlie white assumptions about how Black people will treat animals. The white directors rely on the cheap labour of the Black workers at the sanctuary, but do not fully trust the Black workers to execute their tasks sufficiently. These racial prejudices are defended by the directors of the sanctuary through the pretence of concern for animals, a dynamic that has been observed elsewhere by Suzuki (2017).

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[31] The animal complex refers to the systemic and industrialised killing of animals for human consumption. The AIC includes a variety of actors and sectors, such as legal, agricultural, governmental, public health etc.

The sanctuary, as a place where animals and (white) humans live together in a unique way, provides an interesting microenvironment that reflects greater sociopolitical issues within a South African context. Animals offer insights to human societies, and in this way, they are indeed “good to think with” (Levi-Strauss, 1962).

The pigs tell me everything I need to know about you”: Animal entanglements in human sociality

The examples discussed in the section above demonstrate the extent to which animals were entangled in Esme’s life. Like the other JCAN activists, Esme felt strongly that animals were worthy of moral consideration. To Esme’s imagination, her own configuration of human-animal relations is the ideal to aspire to. How and where might other people fit into Esme’s idealised world order? Esme, through her stewardship of pigs, conceives of herself as a moral individual. Esme offers animals refuge from situations she deems to be immoral, however, Esme’s moral judgements are informed by complicated entanglements of race and culture.

One example of this would be Esme’s use of Holocaust imagery and discourse in her activism, both outside of slaughterhouses and on her Facebook page – which, on a few occasions, lead to temporary suspensions of her account. Esme compared animal agriculture to the Holocaust and likened people directly or indirectly complicit in animal slaughter – those physically killing animals and those who unquestioningly purchase animal flesh – to Nazis.

She also used terms such as "murderers", "flesh-eaters", or "carnivores" when referring to people who were not vegan – including vegetarians.[32]

This language certainly indicates the severity with which Esme condemned the consumption of animals, and it also served as a harsh, public repudiation of those involved in animal slaughter. Given the atrocities committed by the Nazis in World War II, it seems unlikely that Esme would remain amicable with anyone she framed as being akin to a Nazi[33]. This is where the cracks between what Esme said and what she did become visible.

Consider Ricky, the sanctuary's only meat-eating director on the board of four. After losing his main source of income during the Covid-19 pandemic, Ricky started working at a butchery to bring additional funds into the sanctuary. Despite his meat-eating and his involvement in slaughtering animals, Esme tolerated – and even respected – Ricky's role in the sanctuary. Esme never treated Ricky with suspicion nor decried his work outside the sanctuary. This stands in stark contrast to how she criticised the sanctuary's workers, and how she condemned the people who had taken chickens from an overturned truck.

While Esme was, in relative terms, remarkably tolerant of Ricky, her and Ricky's working relationship was nonetheless fraught with tension. This tension was primarily due to Ricky and Esme's clash of configurations of animals-as-food. The two also had "personality clashes" – Esme felt Ricky was obstreperous and controlling – yet neither of the aforementioned reasons were enough to end their cordial working relationship. Esme trusted that Ricky would operate in the best interests of the sanctuary and its residents. Esme had the most experience in caring for pigs, but she relied on Ricky's knowledge in business dealings and farm operations, as well as his money; she valued both his expertise and his financial contributions. Ricky did not embody the perfect pig caretaker, but he slotted comfortably into her model of an idealised world of human-animal co-citizenship (James & Pieterse 2021, Abrell 2021).

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[32] The JCAN activists, and vegan activists more broadly, tend to view vegetarians negatively due to their participation in the egg and dairy industries.

[33] Esme's use of Nazi imagery to condemn animal agriculture should perhaps not be read as a political opposition or general dislike of far-right populism or ethnonationalism – recall her poster-sticking activities for far-right political figures in France.

Esme's tolerance for Ricky could merely be a function of financial dependence for the greater good of the sanctuary or could be indicative of Esme's understanding that despite the moral tension arising from eating *and* living with pigs, Ricky still had meaningful, strong relationships with the animals. To Esme's mind, Ricky's motivations are moral, despite the contradictions. Either possibility demonstrates the entanglements of pigs in Esme's worldview and social life. While she is aware that while Ricky's financial contributions come from butchering animals, it is benefit of the animals in her care. Despite the rocky moral terrain, Esme feels she is acting in the interests of the greater good.

It becomes clear that notions of race and culture are intricately woven into Esme's social imagination and moral judgements. Esme took issue with aspects of Ricky's Afrikaans identity – Esme only spoke English and often felt excluded when Ricky and Grace discussed sanctuary matters in Afrikaans. During the home check in Delmas, Ricky, Grace, and Nicolene spoke mostly in Afrikaans, which Esme believed was done purposefully so that she would not be able to follow the conversation[34]. Esme "hated it" when Ricky gave the sanctuary's newest residents Afrikaans names and "walked around with his Afrikaans swagger".

Esme struggled to assimilate when she first moved to South Africa, as she "didn't click with the Afrikaners". Esme held the assumption that Afrikaans people, too, tended to be cruel in their treatment towards animals. She often referred to how Afrikaners were a meat-eating people, and she associated most hunting activity in Southern Africa with Afrikaners. During a vigil that I attended, Esme stood on the roadside with a sign that read "Hoot to show mercy for pigs". A bakkie[35] drove past, slowed down, and hooted enthusiastically. The four occupants in the bakkie were all white men dressed in full khaki attire. Given their appearance, the activists assumed that the occupants of the car were Afrikaans. Esme turned to me with a surprised expression: "I've never seen *boere*[36] men hoot for us [...] they see animals as meat, nothing more". Notwithstanding Esme's dislike for Afrikaners, she maintained her relationship with Ricky, for the sake of the animals.

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[34] Esme was surely the most knowledgeable about caring for animal and running a sanctuary, however, she believed that Ricky liked to be in control and make important decisions on the sanctuary's behalf. Esme felt that Ricky's need for control stemmed from his Afrikaans identity.

It becomes impossible to ignore the racist undertones of Esme's moral assessments of other human-animal relations. Earlier examples point to Esme explicitly labelling Black people's relations to animals as "savage". It seems Esme holds colonially informed ideas that frame Black people as cruel towards their treatments of animals. On the other side of this coin, to Esme's mind, white people were knowledgeable about and caring towards animals: even white configurations of animals-as-food were more morally palatable than any Black human-animal relation.

Seeking belonging

Suzuki (2017) argues that nature and whiteness co-constitute one another's morality and innocence. Drawing on ethnographic data about white farmers in post-independence Zimbabwe, Suzuki argues that white people construct themselves as stewards of nature. White Zimbabwean farmers in the twenty-first century still reap the benefits of the country's racially segregated colonial period. Given the changing sociopolitical climate, however, white Zimbabweans disproportionate wealth has been contested and challenged. In a bid to erase the linkages between their privileges and colonialism, Suzuki argues that white people in Zimbabwe use expertise and morality in relation to nature as a way to legitimise their position in contemporary Zimbabwean society. White Zimbabweans frame themselves as knowledgeable guardians of nature, and, given Zimbabwe's economic reliance on "nature" (for example, farming or wildlife conservation) white Zimbabwean's position in society is thought to be justified.

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[35] Refers to a pick-up truck. The word "bakkie" originates from Afrikaans but is commonly used across language categories in South Africa.

Similarly, we can see how Esme – a white, ex-Rhodesian – constructs herself as a moral person through her stewardship of nature, albeit in a slightly different configuration. In her framing herself as a moral individual, she, like the farmers in Suzuki's ethnography, legitimise their claim to belonging.

In postcolonial nation states, nature is romanticised – innocent and pure, nature is thought to be a depolitical entity (Green, 2020; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001). In white endeavours to conserve and protect nature, they imagine themselves to be acting in the interests of the greater good – Suzuki (2017:156) demonstrates that through stewardship of nature, whiteness constructs itself as moral: "Whiteness, when paired with nature, erases the traces of its own fashioning". However, framing nature as apolitical allows it to become weaponised to reproduce racial hierarchies that maintain white power on the basis of their "superior" environmental knowledge (Green, 2020).

There are clear parallels between the arguments made above and Esme's situation. Through caring for the pigs – who, despite being a product of commercial farming and domestication, I understand to fall loosely under the category of "nature" – Esme constructs herself as a moral person, who believes her actions and behaviours are guided by the best interests of the pigs. In broad terms, Esme's moral cosmology conceives of animals as innocent and pure, and humans as evil and cruel. Animals, Esme felt, needed protection from humans.

This speaks to a romanticised conceptualisation of nature's innocence commonly held among white people in postcolonial nation states: as other scholars (see Sachs, 2003) have demonstrated, the romanticisation of nature speaks to a longing to "return" to a "natural" order, in which white people were needed to steward nature, and Black people remained in the periphery.

Ricky's intimate knowledge on how to transform a pig's body into unrecognisable cuts of meat does not make him a threat, however, a Black sanctuary labourer enjoying his day off surrounded by the pigs he tends to every day is a cause for suspicion, which demonstrates how Esme's framework of morality – in which nature and whiteness co-constitute "goodness" – operates in a South African context. Esme was ignorant of the cultural and spiritual significance that arose from human-animal relations outside of her own, narrow cultural framework.

When thinking of Esme's position as an activist representing JCAN, her framework becomes troubling. JCAN's apolitical and contextually ignorant approach thus serves as a place where "post-racist form[s] of racism" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p. 651) are not discouraged: racist assumptions are sanitised because of the supposedly apolitical nature of nature. In this supposedly apolitical space, Esme found belonging: Esme shared freely her opinions and thoughts, which were not only accepted by her fellow activists, but often garnered sympathy and agreement. Among the activists of JCAN, Esme found a consensus of beliefs and an acceptance. Importantly, her membership to JCAN allowed her to conceptualise herself as a good and moral person, and her fellow activists reaffirmed this position.

Conclusion

Hogs & Hounds and the life Esme made for herself there, suggest the shape of Esme's "idealised world" (James & Pieterse, 2021). Esme's "idealised world", then, might be interpreted as one in which animals are cared for, respected, invited into human homes, and never used for food. Humans, in this idealised world, exert a degree of benevolent paternalism over animals, while allowing them as much agency as possible. Attending to the dynamics between Esme and her employees, however, produces a less charitable reading: In Esme's "idealised world" and her "ideal social order", it might be specifically *white* humans who have meaningful, caring, good relationships with animals. Esme's "idealised world" thus sits uneasily in the South African context.

Additionally, Esme's case study highlights intricacies of interwoven human-animal life that extend beyond ordinary conceptualisations: *how* she lives with animals, the kinds of animals she lives with, and how she negotiates and organises her social life to serve the animals' best interests.

The JCAN's eclectic combination of perspectives demonstrates an atonal approach that contributes to the inefficacy of the organisation. Esme's unique approach to activism also demonstrates a lack of social awareness and cultural sensitivity. These approaches prove to be obstacles on the path of creating a vegan world in a country where people ascribe various social meanings to animals, often in ways that go against Esme's idealised human-animal interactions.

Transposing a global vegan movement into a South African context is not a simple case of adhering to the guidelines as outlined by the overarching organisation. Transposing such activism into a South African context requires a deeper understanding of the complexities and varieties of human-animal interactions. To refer to Esme's case as one such example; one can see a complicated interaction of nostalgia, belonging, prejudice, and morality, which are negotiated through animals. Esme fails to allow for other conceptualisations of human-animal relations and seeks to impose her idealised worldview on a wider south African audience. In seeking to find or create meaning for herself, she actively denies others the same privileges, decrying other practices of creating meaning as inhumane or uncivilised.

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to illuminate the life of one of the key activists of the JCAN. Focusing on Esme and her life history enables a more intimate entry to understanding the greater forces that shape individual activism. Esme's personal endeavour to save the lives of the porcine individuals she encounters is a means of legitimising her belonging as an "ex-Rhodesian" living within South Africa. Esme still identifies as Rhodesian, implying that she has not fully assumed a South African identity, and perhaps also implying a nostalgic desire to return to what was – both in a physical return to her home country and a political nostalgia for "Rhodesia", a country in which people like her – white, middle-class – prospered.

Esme's story is one of personal sacrifice and dedication for an unlikely cause. Her efforts to create meaning led to the establishment of Hogs & Hounds: a sanctuary and safe space for not only the animal residents, but for Esme, too: a displaced individual attempting to find belonging in a country where her Rhodesianness, whiteness, and veganness sit uneasily.

Hogs & Hounds, an animal sanctuary in a meat-heavy country, provides an interesting look into human-animal interactions in South Africa. The sanctuary itself reflects that human-animal interactions in South Africa are impacted by larger social, economic, and political forces. Considering Esme's involvement in the JCAN, these sociopolitical forces present a challenge regarding the organisation's cohesion and effectiveness. In South Africa, a country in which animal entanglements in human's social lives, the JCAN's sociocultural blindness renders it ineffective, exasperated by the central activists' different approaches to vegan activism.

Chapter 4

Louis: Bearing whiteness

I met Lerato outside a pig slaughterhouse on a cool Wednesday morning. My curiosity had been aroused by his unfamiliar face peering out from behind a sign that read "pigs are individuals, not property – go vegan" with a large picture of a frightened-looking pig with teary eyes. I learnt that this young man was one of Louis' "new recruits." Lerato told me that he used to work as a gardener in Midrand, but recently lost his job because his employer was emigrating. He confessed that he was struggling to find work and expressed concern about keeping warm and feeding himself during the upcoming winter months.

I quietly worried that he may have expected to be paid to be present at the vigil, which would not be the case, as attendance at these events was (and remains) entirely voluntary. Lerato mentioned that when he first saw the Compassionate Advocacy Network whilst walking past the slaughterhouse two weeks prior to our conversation, he thought that the activists were selling pigs. "I didn't really understand. I wanted to join last time but I thought we were selling pigs. But then the old man [Louis] told me that what's happening in there [the slaughterhouse] is not good. Now I think I understand." A group of people passed by and seemed interested in the sign that Lerato was holding. They chatted for a while, and afterwards I asked Lerato what had transpired during their conversation. He told me that the group had also mistakenly thought that we, the activists, were selling pigs. Lerato told me that he rectified this misunderstanding and told the group he got involved with the Compassionate Advocacy Network whilst looking for a job, and proceeded to ask the group of men if they perhaps knew of any opportunities for him. The desperation of Lerato's situation became glaringly obvious to me.

After speaking to Lerato, I crossed the busy road to where Louis stood holding two signs. One read "Hoot to show mercy for pigs" and the other "Compassion or violence – which one do you choose?" Louis stood with three other activists who were also holding up signs at the passing traffic. They were Helen and Esme, who were vigil regulars (whose paths we will cross again later) and Diane, who was relatively new to the vigil and animal activism scene. After greeting them all, I approached Louis for a chat, who greeted me and enthusiastically handed me the sign encouraging passing motorists to hoot. "They're more likely to hoot when they see a young lady like you" he laughed. "I see you met Sonny", he said, nodding to Lerato standing on the other side of the road. I was taken aback by the sudden change in name but didn't immediately enquire further. I would later learn that "Sonny" was Louis' invention – he apparently found Lerato "too hard to pronounce". Perhaps it was also too easy to forget; I noticed Louis had scrawled "Lerato" on his hand, in what I gathered was a failed aide-memoire.

I asked Louis how he had managed to involve Lerato in bearing witness, and he said that Lerato was passing by looking for a job selling pigs during the previous vigil. Louis told me that he had made Lerato aware of all the awful things that transpire behind the walls of the slaughterhouse, and that Lerato was 'moved' and wanted to join.

Somehow, I doubted that.

Louis was adamant that it mattered to have "people like Lerato" at the vigils. He marvelled at how encouraging it was that we were "creating a bigger presence", with attendance at the vigils growing each week.

Between bearing witness to the trucks entering the slaughterhouse, Louis spent his time taking photos for social media. He captured each of the activists holding their signs, taking pains to get several shots of Lerato: Lerato holding the "Pigs are individuals, not property" sign; Lerato receiving one of Louis' vegan meals, freshly cooked on the roadside; Lerato interacting with passersby. Louis felt that posting these photos on social media was important because it showed that we had an active group of activists. When I asked why it mattered that we had a larger group of people attending, he said that it created greater public awareness. It was his hope that people passing by would notice the activists standing outside with their signs and wonder why they're

> there, thus drawing their attention to the slaughterhouse and help bring to light the plight of the animals. Lerato left after receiving the meal from Louis – he needed to continue his job search.
>
> After a few more hours, a few more truckloads of pigs, a few more moments of silence, and a few more tears from the activists, the vigil drew to a close. Louis called us over to his van to share some cake – a little slice of joy after a morning of mourning. The four activists stood huddled around the van while Louis handed out floral porcelain plates with slices of his homemade cherry and dark chocolate cake. He was sure to remind us it was made without eggs or dairy.
>
> A group of men walked by, seeming curious – and once again, the activists were asked where one might buy the pigs depicted on the posters. Louis, visibly offended, took charge. He launched into his (by now, very well-rehearsed) talking points: Firstly, they were not here to sell pigs, but to say goodbye to them. “None of us eat animal flesh,” he told the men, and rattled off an extensive list of reasons why one ought to abstain from meat entirely. He offered the men vegan cake, explaining that it was “cruelty free” as he handed each man a slide with a serviette.
>
> The men thanked Louis profusely for the cake; one commented that he had not eaten since the previous day. Louis shook his head sympathetically, handing him another slice for the road, along with some parting words of advice: “Just remember what I’ve told you guys – it’s so much better to be vegan. It’s healthier for you and your children --- and makes the planet a better place for the future generations.” The men nodded and walked off.
>
> I suspected they’d have preferred the pigs over the cake. Louis, on the other hand, was giddy at what he saw as an unambiguous triumph. He resolved to bring cake to every subsequent vigil, so he could keep starting these conversations with passersby; surely, they could learn that veganism was easy, accessible, and delicious.
>
> “I feel like Marie Antoinette,” he giggled, “let them eat cake!”
>
> Inside the slaughterhouse, the pigs screamed.

This chapter focuses on one of the “key three” activists at the Compassionate Advocacy Network. By taking a closer look at Louis’ life history, I hope to demonstrate how strong personal views pertaining to veganism impact the effectiveness of the organisation, and beyond this, to shed light on one of the various ways in which veganism is practiced and lived in a South African context. Furthermore, this chapter shows how vegan activism affects and is affected by the South African context: a country in which animals exist in the social imaginations of citizens in a variety of ways. A closer look at the lives of each of the ‘core four’ activists reveal how these forces play out on the ground.

I met Louis when I began fieldwork in 2021. Despite this having been our first official meeting, his name was familiar. Louis was well-known in vegan activist circles in Gauteng, largely due to his ability to network via social media. After attending a few of the JCAN's vigils, it became clear that Louis was central to the functioning of the organisation.

In the months that followed, I spent as much time as I could with Louis and asked him to tell me his life story, which he centred around his transition to veganism.

When I first met Louis, he was self-employed. He and two of his closest friends owned and operated a vegan deli in their hometown on the East Rand of Johannesburg. All committed vegans, they opened the shop to familiarise the public with veganism, and to demonstrate how transitioning to this lifestyle did not necessitate sacrificing gourmet food experiences or high-end consumer products.

Both the price point and the offerings of the deli evinced a target market of middle- to upper class South Africans. The tranquil deli was the site of many of my conversations with Louis, who generously shared details of his life story – a history which he centred around his transition to veganism. Veganism, it soon became obvious, was a point of pride and indicative of great personal transformation.

"A Charmed Childhood": Kinship and foodways

Louis always had a mind for animal suffering and thought of himself as an empathetic and compassionate person. He credited his empathy for animals to growing up on a farm in Limpopo, where Louis and his siblings were taught by their grandfather, who owned the farm, to respect all life. Louis' uncle, a well-known game ranger in the Kruger National Park, also instilled a love for animals within Louis. Later he would see a degree of hypocrisy in his family's relationship to animals; how could they claim to respect animals but continue to eat them three times a day?

Louis's father was a dairy farmer, a fact that left Louis feeling torn. He told me the story of a kind and capable man: on the one hand, Louis wanted to honour this legacy. On the other hand, he did not want to justify his father's complicity in activities that Louis now morally opposes. Louis' father grew silage for the dairy cows and vegetables for his family, a point which Louis admired notwithstanding the fact that his father used DDT (Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane[37]) on the crops. "He did everything with the best intentions", Louis told me with a tone of shame. His father

> …did all the stuff that we read about now and know about, but not in a cruel way. I know that calves were kept separate from their mothers, I'd know that, but I didn't know what happened to them afterwards. It's all normal, it's what was done. The cows were milked, and they looked very happy, and they were well fed, they went out into the pastures every day… so it all seemed very normal.

Louis learnt much about gardening from his mother, too, as well as from workers on the farm. During school holidays, the farm workers would show Louis which indigenous plants were safe to eat and how to identify them. He remained an avid gardener, and often incorporated his produce in home-cooked meals.

Louis spoke glowingly, but sometimes evasively, about his family. There are obvious incompatibilities between his current firmly held beliefs and the admiration he still feels for his father, a dairy farmer; for his mother, a lifelong meat-eater; for his grandfather, who used DDT on crops; for his favourite uncle, the game ranger who culled in the Kruger Park.

Since his transition to veganism in 2014, he views his family's consumption of meat and participation in agriculture as fundamentally immoral. He nonetheless referred to his formative years as "a charmed childhood". Long after our interviews, he posted a photograph of himself as a young boy on Facebook. It was captioned "When everything in my little world was perfect. Now the World [sic] has grown so very big. Now I am standing for Pigs driven into Gas Chambers [sic]".

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[37] An insecticide that was banned in South Africa in 1974 due to its harmful effects on the environment, wildlife, and, potentially, humans.

Louis and his siblings attended boarding school, visiting the farm during holidays – holidays, Louis added, were the best part of his schooling career. He felt that his "growing up as a family got lost". As a schoolboy, Louis struggled to make friends and often felt like an outsider – "I, as an English-speaking person, went to an Afrikaans boarding school where there were mainly Afrikaans children. I was bullied mercilessly as a seven, eight-year-old child – *that* was awful."

As Louis recounted instances of name-calling ("*rooinek*"[38]) and physical abuse, he clenched his fists and furrowed his brows, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

Conflating injustices

While Louis seemed to struggle with a moral conflict about his family's exploitation of animals, there was remarkable absence of moral tension arising from his growing up during Apartheid. This might surprise readers who may have expected that any moral discomfort Louis felt about his "charmed childhood" would relate to the far more well-known exploitation Louis' family were, as land-owning white people living in Apartheid-era South Africa, unavoidably implicated in: Apartheid.

In Louis' personal life, he felt that Apartheid "didn't really factor in". However, in 1971, he was conscripted by the South African Defence Force to serve his compulsory year. Under the Apartheid regime, all young, white South African men were forced to serve time in the army. Compulsory conscription was enforced as a reaction to increased resistance against Apartheid. Louis's experience in the army was unpleasant due to his "terrible aversion" to violence as well as the callous nature of his superiors, who "didn't speak nicely" to him and "made him do hard labour".

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[38] An Afrikaans term that translates to "redneck", which was often used derogatorily to refer to British people. The word's suspected origin traces back to the South African Wars, during which British soldiers were notably unprepared for the South African climate, leaving them with bright red sunburns covering their faces and necks.

During this time, Louis did not make the connection between the uniform he wore and the violence it represented. Louis never challenged the status quo; he "didn't think much of it. That's just the way it was". However, it became clear during interviews that he viewed Apartheid through a vegan lens, likening his past complicity in animal cruelty and his past passivity in the face of racial injustice:

> …like veganism, as much as you resent the past, what you did, you can't change it. You have a point where you cut it off and start on a different path. I suppose I can regret stuff in the past, but I can't change it.

Louis first became aware of the effects of Apartheid during his time as a flight attendant with the country's national carrier, South African Airways (SAA). During the Apartheid era, South African aircraft were not permitted to fly over certain African countries, meaning that international flights took longer. Louis also found that people in certain countries were "unkind" towards him and the other white South African aircrew, due to "big anti-Apartheid moves" in other countries.

Louis nonetheless recalled his time with SAA fondly. He joined the airline shortly after his year-long stint in the army with the intent to travel, meet people, and broaden his knowledge. He felt, thus far, he had led a "cloistered little life". His career as a flight attendant broadened his interests and deepened his appreciation of "the finer things": Louis became well-versed in the realms of fine dining, wine, art, opera, and collecting antiques. He maintained these fancies throughout his life, evidenced by hobbies and business endeavours in his later years. He reminisced about trips to Lisbon, Madrid, and London where he learnt much about the countries' foodways, which inspired his love for cooking. Today, he still draws on these experiences for inspiration – albeit without the animals.

He recalled with pride that SAA held the title of the best airline in Africa on multiple occasions as well as once being rated the third best airline in the world. Louis partially attributed this to the stringent training that the cabin crew had to endure: “Our looks, our dress, our turnout… we had to be presentable and trained to handle situations with people to make their flight so much more pleasant… we had to be accommodating.”

Louis’s politeness and eye for detail was still apparent during my time with him. He was always stylishly dressed, hair neatly combed, and he took great pride in ensuring his environments were aesthetically pleasing. Louis’ career at SAA also built his confidence, taught him how to communicate with different or difficult people, and enabled him the ability to stay cool in chaotic situations – skills he found to be handy as an animal activist.

Food, activism, and romantic love

Louis’ globe-trotting introduced him to new experiences and people – the most important being his life partner, Eric. Louis met Eric at a discotheque in London whilst on a work trip in 1979. It was love at first sight: 8 months later, Eric left his job at a bank in Heathrow Airport and moved to South Africa. A series of challenges beset the young couple upon their arrival in South Africa, ranging from the bureaucratic processes to secure Eric’s residency to Eric’s family’s hesitancy surrounding his decision to live in South Africa. The couple also faced difficulties pertaining to the very nature of their relationship – homosexuality was illegal in the country at the time. Louis did not elaborate on what these difficulties were, but recalled his parents being “quite accepting” of his sexuality. He boasted having the most secure relationship out of his 3 siblings, “still going strong 44 years later”.

It was through spending time with Eric’s mother, Jillian, that Louis and Eric came to learn of vegetarianism and animal activism. Jillian was an outspoken activist against vivisection – she often raided the couple’s bathroom cupboard and threw away products that had been tested on animals. During Louis and Eric's visits to the UK, Jillian refused to cook meat – instead, she fed the visitors impressive vegetarian meals. This approach was "integral" to the couple's eventual decision to go vegetarian in 1988. Louis and Eric encouraged and supported each other through their transition to a meat-free lifestyle, making it "seamless and exciting".

Louis and Eric took an interest in activism thereafter – "I always felt like I had to do more, not just not eat animals". Louis and Eric initially joined movements focused on combatting climate change. Louis and Eric attended their first climate protest and made their position on the matter clear through posters and t-shirts – animal agriculture was to blame for global warming. Their stance drew heat from fellow climate protesters, who pointed them towards animal activism groups who might find their ideologies more palatable.

Louis and Eric thus shifted their focus to animal activism, protesting vivisection, live exports, poaching, animals in circuses amongst other issues. Through these channels, Louis and Eric befriended a vegetarian couple who ran a sanctuary for abandoned and abused pugs (the dog breed). These friends went vegan because of moral concerns for animals in the dairy and egg industry, and implored Louis and Eric to do the same. Louis was initially baffled by their decision, asking them "how are you going to give up cheese?" Soon after, in 2014, Louis and Eric adopted veganism, too.

Initially, the couple found their new lifestyle challenging – South African supermarkets and restaurants did not cater for vegans. Despite this, there was "simply no turning back" for the couple. To address this lack, Louis and Eric sharpened their culinary skills and cooked meals for and with one another. Louis fondly remembered scouring the internet for exciting recipes and experimenting with unfamiliar ingredients like nutritional yeast and *kala namak*[39].

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[39] Black salt, often used in Indian cuisine. It has a strong, sulphurous odour and is often used by vegans to add an egg-like flavour to dishes.

Together, they discovered a mutual passion for cooking and dining – Louis playfully added that he did more of the former while Eric preferred the latter: "we're a good match". Louis believed the couple's tricky transition to veganism brought them closer; not only through their shared commitment to the cause, but also in their ability to navigate trials and tribulations together.

The couple realised early into their vegan journey that the absence of vegan friendly products and places were the least of their concern – the most challenging aspect came in the form of isolation and ostracization. When his family and friends came to learn of his transition to veganism, Louis was met with fiery inquiry and snarky remarks. The comebacks only deepened Louis' fervour to fight for animals. This fervour seeped into every facet of Louis' life. He avoided dining at establishments that served animal products and distanced himself from people who were not accepting of his lifestyle:

> …I always encourage them [friends and acquaintances] to try vegan food. But they put their heels in the ground. They won't. I'm not afraid to lose people if that's the case. It's hard to associate with you if you can't respect me, or the animals. But that's it – I'm vegan first and foremost, and I'm proud of it.

Despite their shrunken social circle, Louis and Eric were steadfast in their beliefs. Louis' experiences as a vegan in a nonvegan world led him to believe that people are evil and cruel – not only towards animals, but to him too. Louis found solace in the friendships he built with fellow vegans, and more importantly, in his relationship with Eric.

Within a society in which they felt increasingly ostracized, the couple managed to carve out safe spaces for one another – both emotionally and physically.

Antiques and activism

Louis and Eric shared a mutual love for antiques and opened a business selling and restoring relics and collectables soon after arriving in South Africa in the early 1980s. Louis's career as a flight attendant afforded him access to unique antique shops in the UK and beyond. Their business enjoyed many profitable years, and their success led to the opening of "Uncle Eric's Corner" in the early 1990s. The shopping centre, built in a refurbished farmstead, boasted a variety of businesses: a bookstore; shops selling second-hand and antique furniture; a shop selling hard-to-find vinyl records; a store selling an eclectic range of new-age spiritual goods like crystals and tarot cards; clothing stores; arts and crafts stores; pet stores.

One could also find numerous services on provision – a beauty salon, a carpenter, an upholsterer, a locksmith. *Eric's Tea Garden* provided respite for tired shoppers and cold beers for convoys of motorcyclists. The main attraction was *Uncle Eric's Antiques* – situated in the very middle of the centre, presumably in what used to be a massive barn. *Uncle Eric's Corner* became a household name in Benoni and surrounds – the centre was abuzz with visitors from near and far over the weekends.

Overwhelmed by the popularity of the centre, Louis felt compelled to "give back". *Uncle Eric's Corner* hosted "Animal Welfare Market Days" monthly, inviting animal welfare organisations to set up stands, sell wares, and fundraise through various means: all the profits were to go to the respective organisations. Louis allowed "vetted" organisations (he did the "vetting" himself to ensure the organisation was legitimate) to set up stalls free of charge. Louis felt he was playing his part to uplift and support organisations that aligned with his morals.

In 2018, the antique business fell on hard times, and the couple relocated their shop to a smaller premises: a quaint nursery on the East Rand of Johannesburg. Louis attributed the decline to the rising appeal of minimalism and decreasing interest in elaborate antiques and "things of the past".

Louis felt like "a pig in Palestine" when he learnt that the nursery's restaurant was fully vegan, offering meals like "vish and chips" and "vacon and cheeze toasted sandwiches". Louis and Eric revelled in the idyllic nature of *Uncle Eric's Antiques'* new home – "like our perfect little oasis". After the lockdown brought about by Covid 19, however, the restaurant introduced meat dishes to the menu. The restaurant's patrons were allegedly getting confused by the menu items and the restaurant's owner felt it was not getting enough support from the vegan community.

Louis was deeply upset by this development, and felt it was less to do with the lack of support for the restaurant and was rather a result of the owner's faltering values. Louis held the belief that if someone was vegan for any reason other than ethical concern for animals, they are not "real vegans", thus more likely to revert to meat-eating.

The restaurant's moral backpedalling caused Louis great upset, and he found himself in constant conflict with the owner. The smell of cooking meat wafting into the antique store was at times so offensive that Louis would fall ill. On occasion, the smell would be so overwhelming that Louis would go home, leaving Eric to run the business: "I just can't work in those conditions. All I can think of is those babies whose flesh is cooking in that restaurant".

To reclaim his "perfect little oasis", Louis opened the vegan deli in 2021. The deli was run out of a small house nestled at the back of the nursey, opposite from *Uncle Eric's Antiques.* Louis spent his days at the deli and Eric oversaw the antique store, and the two would often convene in the rose garden between the two businesses. Louis used the deli as a platform to "do activism". Posters on the walls echoed the signs used at vigils: pictures of innocent-looking lambs in fields of flowers, with the message, "every time we eat, we have a choice. Be kind. Go Vegan". Louis often spoke with customers about veganism, which at times led to heated debates:

> I think it goes one step further when you become an activist and you go out and witness, I think it changes you. I might be the wrong person to try and plant those seeds because of the violence and cruelty that I've witnessed towards these animals; I don't put it in the nicest way. A lot of people say you can draw more bees with honey, and I say, well

> the slaughterhouse walls don't drip with honey, they drip with blood. I've maybe become a little bit too forceful in my sewing of seeds. I can't help that. It's starting to affect the way I deal with a lot of people.

The deli's wares included a variety of vegan products, all made in the homes of the owner-operators: pestos and jams, frozen meals, baked goods, a selection of cleaning products, and personal care items such as soaps, creams, and body sprays.

On Sundays, the deli's garden was opened to the public. Tables were laid with antique plates and glasses, and Louis prepared a selection of dishes for customers to partake in. For a price, visitors could mingle and sample Louis's creations in the lush gardens surrounding the deli. The atmosphere was laid-back and casual – attendees would usually sit at a large central table in the garden (or smaller tables under the trees for those who preferred solitude); conversation and wine flowed. Perhaps, if Louis's cooking was tasty and exciting enough, he could convince the public to choose meat-free options more often.

The Sunday lunch attendees were mostly vegans who had heard about the deli through social media channels. The promise of a completely vegan experience drew people from near and far; some travelled over 40 minutes to visit the deli. Although those in attendance were rarely the intended audience (meat-eaters), the lunches became a haven for vegans to gather, network, and partake in Louis' delicious creations.

The deli transformed into a site where Louis grew and nurtured friendships with fellow vegans and activists. The deli became a safe space for vegans; a place to buy products that aligned with their lifestyles, a place to seek comfort and community, a place where they were accepted.

A vegan life / veganism as life

In 2019, an invitation shared by Louis' animal activist friend on Facebook piqued his interest: "Please join JCAN as we bear witness for pigs going to slaughter". He accepted without hesitation – when the day of the vigil arrived, however, Louis was "sick with nerves":

> I was going there terrified because I didn't know how I would react. I was about to see the animals in their final stage, then wondering how I was going to cope, and how I was going to react. It was an unknown thing. I was going there to witness the animals who are going to their slaughter.

At the first sight of a "death truck"[40], Louis realised that vigils "aren't about him", but about the animals going to slaughter. Bearing witness with JCAN left Louis enraged, distraught, heartbroken, and above all, fiercely determined to end animal suffering.

Louis attended nearly every JCAN vigil thereafter. He sought to bear witness on a more regular basis – he took it upon himself to organise vigils, insisting that the group needed to be outside a slaughterhouse once a week, at least. Despite his passionate resolve, Louis was often the only activist in attendance.

Louis' solitary vigils revealed untapped potential for JCAN's activism, and he implemented some structural changes. The organiser, Helen, was supportive of Louis' adjustments, on the condition that all changes abided by CAN's overarching guidelines. One of Louis' vigil modifications was to increase activists' engagement with passersby. Louis did so by designing signs that invited passersby to "stop and say hello" to the activists, as well as standing on the footpath used by passersby (as opposed to the usual spot where activists positioned themselves to face the passing cars). Louis also started to bring cake and cooked meals to distribute to curious passersby. Doing this had the added benefit of attracting activists to join; be it to receive a warm meal or to give one away to a hungry person.

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[40] The term used by activists to refer to the trucks that carry animals to the slaughterhouse.

Louis felt that being an activist with JCAN made him confident in his activism. Vigils provided him first-hand "proof" of animal suffering in South Africa – he had been there, he had witnessed it, he had pictures to prove it – this was surely enough evidence to convince South Africans of veganism. Bearing witness with JCAN also allowed Louis an opportunity to connect with the animals who were at the heart of everything he did: his activism subsequently became more impassioned and imbued with a sense of urgency. For Louis, bearing witness became a moral duty.

Beyond bearing witness

Bearing witness to animals going to slaughter was only the beginning – armed with photos, videos, and stories from outside the slaughterhouse, Louis would take to Facebook to share what the activists had seen, heard, and felt during the vigil. Social media became an important platform for Louis to spread the vegan message to a wider audience, as well as connect with likeminded people from across the globe. Louis's bio on Facebook read, "I am VEGAN Out and Proud", and most of the content he posted was to "educate people and help them see the light" about veganism. The posts often lead to heated online debates with strangers and friends. He lost many friends, both online and in-person, but Louis insisted that the loss was worth it.

Despite losing friends because of his outspokenness, Louis also managed to foster a sense of community online. Louis had membership in many groups: groups sharing recipes; groups for animal activists; groups for nutritional advice; groups for moral support; groups for vegetarians and vegans in South Africa, Gauteng, and the East Rand.

Louis was exposed to different ways of thinking about veganism, too: sometimes to his own detriment. Louis refused to get vaccinated against Covid-19 because of his beliefs surrounding the origin of and the reaction to the pandemic. He thought that the virus originated in a wet market in China and that if more people were vegan, the entire pandemic could have been avoided:

> If you look back from the '50s, the Ebola virus is from ticks, the SARS virus is from pigs, I think, and the swine flu is from eating pigs, mad cow disease, avian flu, even HIV is from eating monkeys in the Congo, or central Africa. I would like to believe, keeping in line with all the other diseases and viruses that have been emerging, that this is another one. If we don't stop the source and the cause of it… this coronavirus might have just been a little dress rehearsal for something big. The cruelty that we have in our hearts and in our souls… I don't think we can have world peace if we're still eating animals.

Louis believed that humans faced greater threats (such as climate change caused by animal agriculture) than something akin to "a bad cold or flu". Throughout 2020, he pointed to the restrictive nature of South Africa's lockdown to draw attention to animal suffering. He argued that animals slaughtered for food endure far worse fates during their lifetime than being in lockdown for a few months. Another reason contributing to his decision not to get vaccinated was the fact that the vaccinations would all have been tested on animals.

Offline, Louis advocated for animals whenever and wherever possible. He kept busy by attending protests, selling cakes for animal welfare organisations at market days, supporting vegan establishments and entrepreneurs, networking with other activists, signing petitions and boycotting products and companies. Louis's veganism and activism stand central to his life. It provides the conceptual grid through which he makes sense of his past and chronologically orders his life (making a clear distinction between his "pre-vegan" and "vegan" days). It determines how he grapples with sociopolitical issues (framing how he understands Apartheid as well as his approach to the Covid-19 pandemic), how he spends his time, and how he creates meaning in his life.

Louis knew intimately what it meant to be an outsider: a child who grew up away from his family; an English schoolboy bullied at an Afrikaans school; a gay man who faced discrimination and intolerance; a white man navigating the loss of power and influence in post-

Apartheid South Africa; a vegan in a nonvegan world. In veganism, Louis found community, purpose, and meaning.

JCAN’s “Jars of Hope”

Although he did not hold the official title of organiser, Louis played and essential role in JCAN’s functioning. As noted in his life history, he implemented changes to the structure of the vigils, notably by bringing along homemade cake. He also started cooking meals for activists and passersby outside the slaughterhouse. The cooking, he noted in a message on the activists’ WhatsApp group chat, was a way to pique curiosity and interest. Not enough passersby, he continued, would approach the group if it were just a few individual activists standing with signs. However, he believed that the smell of a warm meal would attract people, especially on cold mornings. Louis installed a small gas stove in the back of his van on which he heated a large pot of soup, curry, or stew. A homemade sign on the door of the van stated, “FREE from cruelty and animal parts”.

He soon added a “Jar of Hope” to his repertoire, which consisted of an empty coffee jar filled with layers of affordable non-perishables such as lentils, pasta, rice, beans, barley, split peas, and dried vegetable stock. The idea behind the jar is that one can donate it to those in need, and the recipient needs only cook the contents in water for a wholesome meal. The jar is affordable to assemble, not costing more than R20 at the time of writing (Mayo, 2023). Louis hoped that by introducing “Jar of Hope” to vigils, he could demonstrate that veganism is a nutritious, wholesome, and affordable alternative. The outcome was unfortunately not what he had envisioned – the cooked contents were bland and flavourless, which he himself acknowledged. This did not stop him from promoting his “Jar of Hope”, enthusiastically discussing it with passersby and encouraging them to try the “delicious” meal. He asserted that he was doing the right thing, as “at least it was a warm meal for a hungry person”.

On one occasion, Louis prepared a Jar of Hope for a 'friend' he had made during a previous vigil. This friend was a woman, Mbali, who operated a small, informal business down the road from the slaughterhouse where she sold chicken feet, pork heads[41], and *pap*[42] on the side of the street. When Louis first stopped by her small food stand one morning before a vigil, his initial reaction was disgust. However, he soon came to understand that the money she made from selling these meals went towards feeding her family.

Louis believed that Mbali only sold meat products because of the demand from her customers, and that she would attempt a vegan lifestyle if she did not need to abandon her livelihood. Louis felt compelled to "help" Mbali by suggesting Jars of Hope as a substitute for her usual fare. Louis thought that this would motivate Mbali's customers to eat healthier plant-based food, increase her profits, and help reduce animal suffering. Mbali saw this proposed change, however well-intentioned, as a threat to her livelihood and understandably continued to sell her regular fare to passersby. Louis' plan, it turns out, was not only naïve but also completely disregarded local tastes and foodways.

Louis' commitment to Jars of Hope raises important questions pertaining to food, class, and socioeconomic position in South Africa. He evidently felt that while not tasty enough for (mostly middle-class and white) activists, it could be handed out to hungry passersby. The activists took recipients' enthusiasm to mean that interactions between the activists and the passersby were "successful" in that they proved that passersby were "receptive" to veganism. It is important to note here that one in five South African households find themselves in a hunger crisis (Cowling 2023, Mtintsilana 2023). A popular argument used by vegan activists is that many of the crops used to feed animals raised for meat could instead be used to feed humans directly, thus potentially feeding significantly more people and contributing to the reduction of global hunger (Cassidy, West, Gerber, & Foley, 2013). Louis suggested that Mbali shifted her business to plant-based food based on this information. He also used it to attempt to convert passersby to veganism. Although well intentioned, these actions were also deeply problematic and patronising. What is more, they also ignored important socioeconomic and class factors.

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[41] Chicken feet and pork heads are popular, affordable street food options in South Africa.
[42] Another affordable South African staple; a maize porridge.

Mbali's fare catered for customers looking for a portable, filling, tasty, and affordable meal, given that most of them worked in the surrounding factories and warehouses. Whilst the Jar of Hope meal would be affordable and filling, it was less appealing than Mbali's *walkie talkies* (chicken feet) and pig heads, and her customers were unlikely to buy it. Louis's attempted interference with Mbali's business may have been influenced by a personal distaste or disgust for the foods sold at her stall. Here we need to note that economics stand central to South Africans' food choices (Alao, et al., 2018). This is reflected in Louis's interactions with Mbali. Offal is much cheaper than expensive cuts of meat and a popular protein choice amongst a great many South Africans. Louis's bourgeois aversion to offal could be viewed through an economic lens – he has the means to afford a distaste for such foods. Very few, if any, of Mbali's customers likely share Louis's middle-class sentiments on this score. Jars of Hope are thus not a promising alternative to chicken feet, pork heads, and pap, given the socioeconomic dynamics at play in this situation.

Louis's use of the Jars of Hope as an activism strategy is unique to the Johannesburg chapter of the Compassionate Advocacy Network, as it is not a strategy used or promoted by the overarching organisation. The idea for Jars of Hope was conceived as an attempt to alleviate hunger in South Africa, particularly during Covid-19 lockdowns, by encouraging people to compile the affordable jar and distribute them to people in need. While the Jars of Hope did not originate out of vegan activism, the jar's contents are "accidentally vegan"[43]. Louis thus saw an opportunity to incorporate the concept into the JCAN's activism. This points to how new vegan activism strategies emerge in response to different contexts.

Louis' attempts at veganising Mbali's business points to a hesitancy on his part to allow for different ways of relating to animals. White (2011) hints at a similar hesitancy in *Beastly Whiteness* by referring to an animal sacrifice that garnered national attention, as well as white outrage. Similarly, perhaps on a smaller scale, Louis' interference with Mbali's business model implies a rejection of the ways in which her customers relate to animals. In this disavowal, Louis denies other – completely viable – ways of relating to animals; thus, he perpetuates harmful ideas pertaining to race and culture in a South African context, and further perpetuates the idea that veganism in South Africa is a "white, elitist thing".

No such thing as a free meal

While Louis and his fellow activists may have attempted to frame gifts of food as a well-intentioned way of initiating conversations with passersby it was, in fact, a weighted exchange. In return for a meal, recipients first had to "listen to the [vegan] message before any food appears", as Louis stated on the JCAN's WhatsApp group chat. This message usually centred around why the JCAN was present at the slaughterhouse and included detailed and sometimes sensationalised accounts of the detrimental effects of animal products on the health of individuals, the environment, and animals. The passersby usually nodded along, whether they agreed or not.

These interactions served as opportunities to make the JCAN more visible. The encounters involved taking photos with and of the people who received meals, which were later posted on social media. These posts act as a display of sorts: a way to indicate that the JCAN's activism is "successful" in that they were able to draw people in and have meaningful conversations about veganism with passersby. These images also demonstrated that the vegan message the activists are advocating for could cross over cultural and racial boundaries. In a South African context, this seems to be an important point to make within vegan activist groups, due to veganism in South Africa being viewed largely as a white, middle-class venture (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2020).

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[43] A term used by vegans to refer to products that are not made specifically to be vegan, yet the products do not contain any animal products.

An activist mentioned to me during an interview that "people tend to think of veganism here [South Africa] as a white, elitist thing." Observations made during fieldwork seems to bear this out. At a post-vigil debrief, an informant recalled going into a township to save a pig, and commented on the conditions in which she found the animal. Upon hearing the story, another activist remarked that "township people just don't care about animals". Louis, too, once expressed the opinion that some people are not disgusted by the spectacle of animal death (for example, in the case of hunting or traditional slaughter), because certain groups of people are "perhaps less evolved". As we have seen, Louis and his fellow activists therefore (naively) endeavour to educate members of these nonvegan groups about what they consider to be the moral and ethical superiority of a vegan lifestyle, about the affordability of a vegan diet, and about the viability of vegan livelihoods.

However, Louis also puts a great deal of stock in demonstrating to his social media audience that vegan activism is not just a "white, elitist thing." This is primarily achieved by sharing photographs on various social media platforms of people recruited (through the means outlined above) from the street to participate in vigils. It could be argued that this is a cynical ploy as the people thus portrayed as vegan activists often participate in vigils only out of desperation (having been coopted by the promise of a free meal). However, Louis suggested on multiple occasions that these interactions with passersby would encourage them to speak to "their own communities", thus initiating what he hoped to be a chain reaction of interest in or conversions to veganism.

Although passersby were being used to further the JCAN's cause, activists seemed to be left with a sense that they had 'done some good'. They not only believed that they had imparted important knowledge to people who lack it, but also that they had contributed positively to the lives of people who go hungry on a regular basis. Although well-intentioned, this form of activism comes across as particularly tone deaf and patronising. One might very well be sceptical about its chances of success in a country such as South Africa.

Mistranslation

The global Compassionate Advocacy Network organisation follows a set of guidelines that outline their practices and principles to ensure continuity and standardisation for all chapters across the world. It was largely the responsibility of the organiser (who oversees the planning and execution of local chapters' activities, including vigils) to ensure that these guidelines were understood and adhered to by activists. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, it seemed as though the global network's guidelines were generally upheld. However, the interpretation of said guidelines left a lot of room for volunteers to 'do activism' as they saw fit. Local activists evidently felt that the Compassionate Advocacy Network's (universal) guidelines sometimes had to be interpreted creatively to fit the particularities of the contexts in which they were to be implemented.

The signage displayed at vigils illustrate this process well. Chapter organisers were supposed to choose from a selection of signs available on the CAN's website and to print and make them available to activists for use at vigils. The signs were similar in their general layout – each sign had a 'nongraphic' image of an animal (nongraphic in the sense that the image did not depict an animal being slaughtered, an act of violence committed on an animal or a depiction of a dead animal). The images usually showed young animals, either piglets, calves, chicks, or lambs, and it seemed to me, invoked a sense of innocence. Other images depicted animals in factory farms or in trailers, presumably on the way to slaughter. Some displayed close-ups of farmed animals' faces, most of which looked forlorn, distressed, or hopeless. The pictures were usually accompanied by a phrase or message encouraging the viewer to go vegan.

One example featured the words "Stop Speciesism. Go Vegan" accompanied by a picture of a lamb, piglet, puppy, kitten, and chick alongside each other. The JCAN logo was printed on the bottom right of the poster. The intention, made clear by conversations and interviews with activists, is to make people reconsider the societal categorisation of animals. Vegans tend to believe that the categories are somewhat arbitrarily defined – they question why some animals are worthy of our consideration, care, and protection, while others are not. This forms the basis of the concept of "speciesism", which is defined as "moral consideration based on species membership" or discrimination against another species (Singer, 2002, p. 6).

Speciesism is a term is regularly used in vegan and animal activist discourse yet tends to not be used in realms of social justice activism beyond these spaces. During my fieldwork, I found that activists considered it to be as important a social justice issue to address as racism and sexism – in fact, some of the activists argued that it was the *most* pressing social justice issue. Louis felt strongly that other social issues could be resolved only once a vegan world is achieved – he thought that should South Africans go vegan, hunger and poverty, for example, would be solved. However, the concept speciesism was not fully understood by those who engaged with the signs (passing motorists and pedestrians; the JCAN's target audience). The language used – specifically, the term "speciesism" – is largely inaccessible to people unfamiliar with discourse surrounding vegan activism. From the perspective of the activists the sign conveyed a powerful message confronting the viewer with the alleged arbitrariness of the socially constructed categories of moral consideration, but this message was not conveyed to the target audience. There were clearly gaps between signs and signifiers and the parent organisation's supposedly universal message was lost in translation.

Louis, too, felt that the signs made available by the core organisation were not fit for purpose. To his mind, a simple white poster with bold, black lettering and a much more direct (perhaps even blunt) message was likely to be effective. He therefore designed his own posters, one of which read: "Stop the murder at the gas chambers", with a swastika in the letter "o". Louis clearly wanted to draw a parallel between the current system of animal agriculture and the Holocaust. One slaughterhouse that was regularly the site of the JCAN's vigils happened to be the only slaughterhouse in South Africa that still made use of gas chambers to render pigs unconscious before slaughter (Areff, 2015). The use of gas chambers in the process of 'anesthetisation' of pigs provided a link for Louis to make the comparison.

Other signs promoted by the parent organisation missed their mark for different reasons. One such a sign depicted a puppy with the word "family" printed underneath alongside a picture of a piglet with the word "dinner" printed below it. At the bottom, the poster read "why? Go vegan". This sign points to the supposed arbitrary distinction between the animals we consume and those we consider family (in the sense of keeping a companion animal, caring for them and sharing one's home with them). It is meant to encourage its audience to consider why certain animals are worthy of being bestowed the title of "pet" while others are categorised as "dinner". Yet the ways in which people relate to animals are not universal, and the keeping of companion animals is influenced by sociocultural forces. An excerpt from a conversation between myself and a restaurant manager who expressed an interest in veganism highlights some of the issues at play:

> One of our managers, a white lady, came in with her dog the other day, and some of the Black staff were really scared. She told us the dog was like her baby – we just laughed. That thing was ugly man! We just don't relate to animals the same as the whites. In the past, white people have literally put animal lives above Black lives. That's why a rhetoric of 'why do you eat cows but love dogs?' is lost on me. Like, I don't love dogs, man, sorry!

Van Sittert and Swart (2007) trace the practice of keeping dogs as companion animals in white, middle-class South Africa. During the apartheid period, they show, dogs were used to defend "white privilege and property" (2007:29) – often in the form of guard dogs that were supposed to protect white people and their property against the 'threat' posed by Black people (a practice that persists today). Thus, in post-apartheid Black imaginations, dogs became a symbol of white oppression of Black people (Van Sittert & Swart, 2007). During informal conversations with passersby at vigils, it became apparent to me that most people who kept 'pets' did so for practical reasons – keeping dogs for security and keeping cats to control rat populations. They did not consider these animals part of the "family". It follows that the poster was therefore largely ineffectual.

Different forms of activism assumed to be universal have also failed when uncritically applied elsewhere in the world. Li (2017) discusses an incident during which PETA[44] made use of American-centric marketing tactics, such as the sexualisation of the female body, in a bid to get Cubans to eat less meat. At the heart of the campaign were two women dressed in lettuce-leaf bikinis handed out "vegan starter kits" containing information and recipes meant to encourage Cubans to transition to veganism. The message itself, although translated into Spanish, did not account for the *meaning* of meat in a Cuban context. If PETA understood the social and cultural meanings of meat in that country, the activists' message may have been better received (Li, 2017). Moreover, these vegans' activism seemed to be oblivious of the circumstances of the people they attempted to convert to veganism: "Seen in the context of Cuba's complex history of food shortage and dependency," Li (2017:8) observes,

> PETA's efforts seem both insensitive and inefficacious. PETA's presentation of veganism addresses the Cuban citizen as a consumer exercising personal dietary choices, eliding any concern with what Vega circumspectly describes as the "disadvantages of distributing recipes whose ingredients are not available to most".

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[44] People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

The JCAN's attempts to convert all passersby at vigils to veganism similarly ignores the South African context of food insecurity by taking for granted that every South African is entirely free to choose what foodstuffs they consume.

Li (2017) also likens PETA's attempts to convert the world at large to veganism to Tsing's concept "globalisms", in which perceptions of "globality" are often performative and fictionalised (Tsing, 2005). According to this logic, PETA's trip to Cuba gives the impression of a global reach, by using media to portray that their message and activism reaches countries across the world (despite very little investment and resources going into the trip itself). When applying Li's thinking to the context of the CAN, it could be argued that international chapters of the movement such as the JCAN give the impression that the movement has a much more global reach that is in fact the case. The JCAN could thus be argued to reify (through processes of performativity and fictionalisation) the message that a "vegan world" is not only possible but also immanent.

The politics of sight

Thinking with Pachirat (2011), vigils and bearing witness makes visible what is commonly hidden in society – in this case the slaughter of animals, which is usually, - at least as far as most of the urban middle-classes are concerned – kept out of the public gaze. Pachirat (2011:245) argues that "breaching the zones of confinement and rendering the repugnant visible thus appears as an available tactic of social and political transformation". Keeping the repugnant hidden makes it tolerable for consumers and allows morally questionable practices to persist. According to Pachirat (2011), the politics of sight is a process of exposing what is hidden in society to catalyse social or political change. In the case of the CAN, this involves exposing the standardised/normalised practices of exploiting nonhuman animals for meat. Pachirat argues that his ethnography of a slaughterhouse acts as a type of politics of sight, as brings to light what is hidden in society. It follows that the JCAN, and perhaps this ethnography, act as types of politics of sight.

Louis's involvement in the JCAN speaks to the politics of sight in a variety of ways. Firstly, and perhaps most prominently, is his desire to draw public awareness to the slaughterhouse itself. Slaughterhouses are places that are "hidden in plain sight" (Pachirat, 2011, p. 8), meaning that motorists or pedestrians passing by often do not consciously notice this place; inconspicuously tucked away in an industrial area, disguised as another factory property with assorted chimneys, warehouses, nondescript buildings, and trucks steadily rolling in and out. Louis and his fellow activists draw public attention to slaughterhouses through their organised vigils. This tactic was arguably effective. I observed during fieldwork that the very presence of the activists outside the slaughterhouse drew the attention of passing motorists and pedestrians. This, according to some of the activists, was enough to "plant a seed"; to make people aware of the existence and proximity of the slaughterhouse. Activists, and Louis in particular, hoped that passersby would question *what* this industrial complex (the slaughterhouse) is, *why* protesters might be brandishing posters at its entrance, and ultimately that these people would join the vegan cause. But as we have seen, this was easier said than done.

Throughout fieldwork it became evident that Louis, in particular, believed that making the process of animal slaughter visible would inevitably convert witnesses to veganism, or, at least, force them to reconsider their conceptualizations of animals as food. He often recited the Paul McCartney quote "if slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian" (McCartney, 2010) and modelled his activism on this idea. He therefore made a point of sharing images and videos of animals in varying phases of the process of industrialised slaughter on social media. Louis thus engaged in a type of politics of sight by creating conditions of visibility to expose what is "hidden in plain sight" (Pachirat, 2011). He hoped that the people who saw the images and footage would understand that the purchasing and consumption of animal products necessitates the violent process of slaughter and thus choose to go vegan. This echoes the intentions of other activists who share footage online as a form of activism, as well as animal rights groups, such as Anonymous for the Voiceless, that organise street demonstrations during which undercover animal farm and slaughterhouse footage is displayed to edify the public to the "truth" of industrialised animal slaughter (Anonymous for the Voiceless, 2023).

However, the foundation of this kind of activism rests on the assumption that people will react to footage of animal slaughter in predicted ways; namely, with horror, disgust, disappointment, sadness, or anger. As Bernatchez (2022) notes, "…using media to expose animal suffering on industrialized farms is a tactic to stand up against the normalization[sic] of animal violence for human food guided by the underlying ethical principle that if people perceive the reality of food production, they will change their food habits" – this assumption is complicated in a South African context, however. Many South Africans practice ritual slaughter for cultural and religious purposes; not only witnessing animal slaughter but participating actively in the killing process. Examples of this include ritualistic slaughter to mark life events such as weddings and funerals (Phalafala, 2013) and sacrificial slaughter to celebrate religious events (Tayob, 2022). Furthermore, many South Africans take part in game hunting. The ongoing existence of these practices of animal killing challenges Louis's (and the JCAN's) assumption that witnessing animal slaughter will bring it to an end.

There are, of course, stark differences between industrialised slaughter and ritual slaughter. Industrialised animal slaughter, as opposed to ritual slaughter, is devoid of cultural or religious significance – the resulting products may hold social significance (for example, the tradition of eating certain foods to celebrate specific events) but the process of killing within the realm of industrialised slaughter is noticeably absent of inscribed meanings and ritual. As Bjørkdahl and Syse (2023) note, "[t]he symbolic transformation of meat today takes place not with blessings or sayings or excuses, with offerings or particular uses of the animal, or with particular ways of comporting oneself during slaughter." However, it is important to note that in making repugnant practices visible, therefore dismantling the power they hold, they may become normalised and thus no longer be repugnant (English & Zacka, 2022). Despite this danger, Louis and his fellow activists firmly believed that there is revolutionary potential in exposing the workings of a system they considered morally bankrupt.

And there might be a grain of truth in this belief. People who engage in ritual slaughter are not immune to visceral responses to the industrialised killing of animals that takes place in slaughterhouses (killing devoid of cultural significance and care). According to Phalafala (2013):

> One may not just take a cow and kill it without ritual. Therefore you perform a ritual for the cow so it may facilitate a ritual for the humans and the ancestors. And you never kill a cow in front of other cows, as we have seen in these terrible slaughterhouses.

This raises interesting questions about the premise on which much of the JCAN's activism rests. While making the violence of animal slaughter visible through a politics of sight is unlikely to necessarily change all people's relationships with animals and their attitudes towards food, it may very well conscientize some to aspects of the industry that they were unaware of and may find unpalatable.

Louis operated on the assumption that all people will find the slaughter of animals to be morally offensive. The notion of animal slaughter being repugnant could be traced back, as Reed (2014) argues, to the late nineteenth century, a period marked by a change in attitudes in Western countries as upper-class people grew concerned that public animal slaughter was unhygienic, uncivilized, and disgusting. Consequently, killing animals for food was removed from the public gaze, and moved behind the walls of newly erected slaughterhouses. Most people today thus do not actively partake in the killing of the animals whose flesh they consume.

The spatial move of animal slaughter from public to concealed was the beginning, Reed (2014) argues, of the separation between "meat" and "animal", and it is this gap that Louis, as well as many activists and vegan groups, attempted to bridge in an effort to bring an end to the exploitation of animals. As we have seen, the assumption that people will have similar visceral reactions to the sight of slaughter is problematic in a South African context, complicating Louis's (and more broadly, the JCAN's) activism. When queried about why he thinks that some people can witness slaughter and still partake in the consumption of animal products, he answered:

> Maybe some people are… perhaps less evolved, or some are just more compassionate… When you grow up believing something is normal, that's how it will be until you start questioning it. For as long as it remains the norm, people will keep on doing it.

Louis' patronising ideas were informed by mentalities that linked evolutionary hierarchies to whether people consumed meat and the ways in which they related to animals (White, 2011) (Kahn F. , 2002).

Louis's ignorance of the social and cultural importance of animal products is reflected in his activism. In trying to convert people to veganism by encouraging them to replace meat with plant-based options, he ignored the meanings and significance often attached to food. Phalafala (2013) elaborates on one example:

> …cows function to connect, to bridge, and to invoke. They exist in a liminal space between the human and divine, the physical and spiritual, the alive and the ancestors, the worldly and the universal.

Louis and his fellow activists thus often overlooked the fact that slaughter and the consumption of meat products can be complex and important meaning-making activities that – in many instances – serve to venerate nonhuman animals and to secure their connection to humans.

It seems to me that Louis attempted through his activism to produce his version of an ideal world in which human-animal interactions are 'moral' (James & Pieterse, 2021, p. 13) . He did so through continually *choosing* to witness the suffering of animals, to make this suffering visible to others and as a way of maintaining his own commitment to the protection and saving of animals. Louis's worldview is based on how he relates to animals, and this is informed by and informs his involvement in vigils. Louis's activism also involves the sharing of images and videos from vigils on his personal social media account. While these processes stand central to the ways in which Louis sees himself as a moral person, they also open him and his fellow activists to criticism from, and conflict with, people who frame animals and the way in which humans should interact with them differently.

Conclusion

Louis's care and concern for the lives of nonhuman animals was palpable. Veganism shaped Louis's worldview and provided him with meaning and purpose in the context of increasing insecurity and precarity. Louis faced discrimination throughout his life, leaving him feeling isolated and alone. As an older white male in post-apartheid South Africa, he no longer experienced the status and privileges he had become accustomed to during apartheid. Louis found a purpose, a community, and a sense of meaning and belonging in the JCAN. Involvement in the organisation allowed him to feel as though he made positive contributions. Through his activism, he also made meaningful connections and established himself as a part of a community. Through his curation of the deli, he created a type of sanctuary for himself and other vegans. The deli and the antique shop provided one of a few safe spaces in the Johannesburg area where Louis and likeminded individuals could connect and share.

While Louis's activism was well-intentioned, he was largely oblivious of the extent to which socioeconomic forces influenced food choices and consumption practices. His advice and recommendations came across as tone deaf and patronising; erasing sociocultural significance attached to animal products and minimising the importance of the meanings ascribed to animals in the social imaginations of South Africans. His lived veganism of deli foods and Sunday lunches differed vastly from the veganism he advertised during vigils, which is bland, effort-intensive, and insensitive to the complex and varied meanings attached to animal products and the consumption thereof.

The attempts Louis made to involve passersby in conversations about veganism were two-fold. His primary goal was to convert people to veganism. However, he also attempted to document these interactions through pictures and videos shared on WhatsApp and Facebook to create the impression that the JCAN's message is applicable to all South Africans. It is an example of globalism (Tsing, 2005) – giving the impression of a global reach through fictionalisation. Posting images of working-class Black people 'protesting' or receiving vegan food served as an attempted rebuttal of the claim that veganism in South Africa is a "white, elitist thing".

What is more, by drawing attention to the slaughterhouse, Louis and his fellow activists hoped that passersby would come to understand what happened inside of these spaces and that they would subsequently decide not to support these industries. Louis's strategy of exposing the process of animal slaughter is a popular tactic in vegan activism, but, as illustrated above, appears potentially ineffective in a South African context. However, while Louis's attempts at "rendering the repugnant visible" (Pachirat, 2011, p. 245) and at creating the illusion of a united South African vegan front are by no means guaranteed of success, it allowed him to see himself as a productive and valuable member of society. And while he was not completely ignorant of the sociopolitical forces keeping many South Africans from embracing veganism, Louis leveraged them to further his own and the JCAN's ends. As far as Louis's activism is concerned, the lines between "making a vegan world" and "making Louis" seem very blurred indeed.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The first of its kind in South Africa, the Johannesburg Compassionate Advocacy Network formed part of a global movement, the Compassionate Advocacy Network, which sought to bring an end to all animal exploitation. Achieving this goal would require mobilising passionate vegans across the globe: CAN envisioned vigils being staged at every slaughterhouse on earth, exposing the long-hidden evils of industrialised animal agriculture to members of the public, who would then become vegan *en masse* in response to what they had witnessed. Slaughterhouses would close, and the remaining nonvegans would soon have no option but to follow a plant-based diet. As a result, people would be well-fed and healthy, rapid environmental degradation would slow significantly, and the animals would live out their lives in sanctuaries, free from harm.

CAN's vision for a better world is closer to vegan eschatology than a viable political programme. I nonetheless believe there is some value in CAN's activism strategies. The contemporary late-capitalist, neoliberal moment has seen rapid and, in some cases, ruinous industrialisation of food systems. One consequence of this is a greater distance between the "consumer and consumed" (Staples & Klein, 2017). Between the consumer and the consumed lies the unknown: obscured from consumers, cheap and efficient production keeps prices low and morality irrelevant. As Helen succinctly noted, "It's money versus the need for health, and money wins, hands down". It is under these auspices that the transformation of "animal" into "meat" takes place, a practice that Pachirat (2011) argues is one that is tolerable largely because it is concealed and hidden from the public gaze.

The JCAN's primary activism strategy involved bearing witness to those liminal passengers destined for the slaughterhouse: in the trailers, the pigs were beyond saving, but they had not yet been killed – they were between "animal" and "meat". In doing so, the activists employ a kind of politics of sight, defined as "organized, concerted attempts to make visible what is hidden and to breach, literally or figuratively, zones of confinement in order to bring about social and political transformation" (2011, p. 15). However, the JCAN activists' attempts at "making visible" were complicated in the South African context. Although Helen organised the group in alignment with CAN's globally applicable guidelines, CAN's activism strategy presupposes that bearing witness to animal slaughter will evoke similar feelings of repugnance in all people.

Among various sociocultural configurations in South Africa, animal slaughter remains an important practice: it is a way of constituting one's identity, negotiating one's position in society, reaffirming or creating kinship structures, practicing religious and spiritual rites, or marking a celebration. Here, animal slaughter is by no means hidden: "Whilst ritual slaughter is not something performed daily, it is a practice that, for purposes of communicating with and seeking help or guidance from the ancestors, or for seeking to appease them, is wholly normative for the majority of South Africans" (Spiegel, 2020).

The JCAN activists condemned all animal slaughter, but they were particularly affronted by what they deemed to be morally inappropriate reactions to slaughter. In briefly tracing the West's history of animal slaughter, Reed (2014) provides some insight as to why the practice came to be morally offensive. Philosophies emerging from the Enlightenment led to increasing concerns over the hygiene of public animal slaughter. Coupled with colonial notions of progress, rationality, and civility, the West eschewed practices thought to be "primitive", including the violence inherent in animal slaughter. The increased distance between animal slaughter and the public gaze in turn had the effect of creating *more* moral ambiguity surrounding the witnessing of animal slaughter.

The CAN's activism strategy is largely underpinned by Western, vegan ideas of morality, and it is evident that the JCAN activists ascribed to these understandings. To the minds of the JCAN activists, any animal slaughter is immoral, but to witness animal slaughter and not react in a "morally appropriate" way is worse still. As Reed (2014) demonstrates, moral discomfort over animal slaughter is intricately wound into colonial ideas of what constitutes as "civilised" or "uncivilised".

JCAN's uncritical regurgitation of CAN's strategies potentially reproduces racially charged, colonialist notions of progress that position certain people as, to use Louis' phrasing, "perhaps less evolved". CAN's activism is not *intentionally* designed to reinforce colonial hierarchies, but as we have seen elsewhere (Cordeiro-Rodrigues, 2020; Green, 2020; Li, 2017; White, 2011), there is a desperate need for a contextually and historically sensitive approach to animal activism in South Africa, precisely because of animals' complex and contentious entanglements in human social life. As Suzuki (2017) reminds us, racism and xenophobia easily creep into public discourse under the guise animal rights activism (2017, p. 108).

Colonially informed dichotomous notions were evident among the JCAN activists. Esme's blatantly racist assumptions about Black people's ill-treatment of animals was one such manifestation of this. Because of South Africa's history of Apartheid, race and class are still correlated. As we have seen, animals-as-food and their variety of entanglements in human social life shape and are shaped by factors like race and class. Consider Kroll's observations about the "foodways of the poor" in South Africa: meat, although largely unaffordable, is still central to many diets of impoverished South Africans, often chosen over inexpensive and nutritious alternatives (2016). This, Kroll argues, is because of the social meanings ascribed to

– and ascribed by the consumption of – meat. Animals-as-food are thus an "asset in the process of class formation and the accumulation of capital" (Kroll, 2016, p. 13). Bourdieu's (1979) theory of taste serves as a useful framework here, as he argues that taste and class co-constitute one another. As we can see in a local context, foodways aspire to reflect a higher social position.

Yount-André and Zembe (2023) demonstrate another example in which many Black South Africans consume meat to indicate upward mobility and as means from people to distance themselves from the experiences of deficiency and disenfranchisement under Apartheid. Here, Yount-André and Zembe also point to the intersections of race, class, and foodways. The JCAN activists, Helen in particular, dismiss these entanglements as unimportant. Helen's assumption that "the poor don't care about the environment" runs the risk of perpetuating the exclusion of groups of South Africans from conservation spaces, reproducing what has been called "the unbearable whiteness of green" (Green 2020).

The dismissal of the complex ways that animals-as-food are entangled with variables like race and class also perpetuates hierarchies: The activists fail to acknowledge their own privileged position as well as the inherent invisibility of whiteness (that whiteness is assumed to be the "norm" against which others are judged). As Daya (2023) notes, "…racialized and moralistic ideas of good food and health come to be dominant in particular contexts, at the expense of other food traditions, habits and preferences", echoing Bourdieu's (1979) argument that taste can be weaponised by the ruling class to dictate "good" and "bad" tastes to the working classes.

The activists maintained some rudimentary awareness of the socioeconomic realities of many South Africans, as evidenced by Louis' attempts to leverage these to further JCAN's cause. As illustrated in Chapter 4, Louis' improvised introduction of the Jars of Hope emerged in response to his noticing that passersby were hungry. Handing out warm meals to hungry pedestrians proved to be beneficial for Louis: he felt he was acting charitably and kindly, he documented these interactions on social media to signal that JCAN was racially diverse, and he was able to edify passersby about veganism in a bid to help the animals. In doing so, Louis saw himself as a good and productive person.

Like Louis, Esme and Helen were also acted in ways that helped them to conceive of themselves as good people. Animals were entangled in their configurations of morality, and thus JCAN provided a vehicle through which these activists could act on their beliefs and align themselves with a cause that they felt was for the betterment of animals, the planet, and other people. JCAN provided a platform for people with similar sensibilities about how human-animal relations ought to be, and in this way, the activists felt a sense of belonging.

This ethnography sheds light on the ways in which white people living in post-Apartheid, neoliberal South Africa are negotiating their position in a precarious and ever-changing society. It appears that white South Africans are experiencing crises of identity and belonging, a phenomenon that has been documented among white people in postcolonial states (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Suzuki, 2017). The JCAN activists are no exception – their activism enables them to engage in personal projects of meaning-making, and nature lends itself as a suitable vehicle for doing so.

As Pieterse and Powers (2023:9) note, “In the post-apartheid era, the assertion of white autonomy usually manifests in the civil society arena (rather than in attempts to capture formal political power)”. The JCAN’s “apolitical” but sometimes racialised animal rights’ activism might be understood along these lines. Here I am also reminded of Suzuki’s (2017:156) argument that whiteness washes itself clean through stewardship and care for nature. Nature, in turn, “rises in estimation the more deeply sedimented its connection to whiteness becomes; it is idealized, romanticized, and imagined in increasingly pure and moral terms”. Protecting innocent animals from humanity's cruelty similarly washes the activists clean; thus, helping them constitute themselves as moral people and productive members of society.

For the "key three", JCAN became a safe and accepting space, offering the activists belonging in an increasingly precarious moment. The JCAN was arguably attractive to the likes of Louis, Esme, and Helen because of its inherently apolitical position: there were no guidelines to ensure unidirectionality and uniformity in ideological approaches. The activists failed to realise that to "leave politics out of veganism" was a political position in and of itself. The JCAN seemed to draw in the politically homeless, and in so doing, played host to the uncritical reproduction of colonially informed hierarchies and ideologies.

The activists sought to think of themselves as good and moral people by living and acting in accordance with their personal morals; that is, abstaining from exploiting animals in any manner. Taking this a step further, the activists felt morally obliged to assist in the creation of a vegan world through their activism by attempting to convince people to convert to veganism, too. While well-intended, the activists were largely ignorant to other factors – socioeconomic, cultural, spiritual – that may deter them from going vegan. Alternative configurations of animals-as-food (such as in cases of sacrifice or ritual slaughter) are not accounted for by CAN's standardised activism strategies. As a result, JCAN has no repository of pre-approved tactics suited for pursuing CAN's goals in the South African context. The JCAN activists discussed here, moreover, lack the awareness and appreciation of alternative foodways and human-animal entanglements that developing a contextually appropriate approach would necessitate.

While this dissertation may come across as hypercritical at certain points, it is not my intention to frame my participants as evil people operating with of sinister motives. Their endeavour to improve the lives of humans and animals – and to address the ecological crisis –

is noble and respectable. Like many others, they struggle to finding meaning, belonging, and community – we live in a time when these are increasingly hard to come by. Perhaps, with reflexivity and alternative approaches, there may be workable solutions to the ills my participants wished to combat.

Green (2020) outlines suggestions to decolonise conservation efforts in South Africa, and these could perhaps serve as a useful framework for organisations like JCAN. Green suggests approaches that focus on reconsidering the scientific authority that is present in South African conservation. Doing so would allow for dialogue with and incorporation of indigenous ways of knowing. Another proposal put forward by Green is to replace the human/nature divide with a "socio-ecological system" – this suggestion, in the context of this dissertation, could further contribute to the dissolution of other dichotomous divisions in the activists' imaginations.

Another point of potential cohesion is perhaps to be found in a consensus that the "industrialised killing" of animals on such a massive scale is worth examination. Phalafala (2013) points to this in comparing the sanctity of ritual slaughter to the large-scale industrial slaughter: "And you never kill a cow in front of other cows, as we have seen in these terrible slaughterhouses". Staples and Klein (2017) argue that going vegetarian or vegan is not necessarily the only way to reconceptualise our relationship to animals-as-food, by referring to global trends that demonstrate a growing interest in "locally grown", "ethical" meat.

I feel it is worth disclosing why I chose to step away from the JCAN five years ago. Firstly, and more generally, my veganism itself had transformed – I no longer thought it was appropriate to impose my personal beliefs on others. With this shift in mindset, I stepped away from all forms of vegan activism I had previously engaged in. Secondly, I felt the JCAN's activism was ineffective. As someone who had already committed to veganism, it was torturous to bear witness to animals going to slaughter, knowing I was helpless in preventing their deaths. I left vigils emotionally drained and depressed. While other activists attend vigils to reaffirm their commitment to the animals, I was simply overcome by the weight of it all – perhaps this will be read as cowardly. I felt that through vigils, the activists were just preaching to the choir – those who should be in attendance refused to look, and those who were in attendance had already seen far too much.

Until such a time where veganism is a healthier, easier, more affordable and attractive alternative, I take a critical stance to manifestations like JCAN. Veganism, as defined by the Vegan Society International, is to abstain from the use and exploitation of animals "as far as possible and practical" (The Vegan Society, 2021). Perhaps returning to the very basic components on veganism suggests a way forward in South Africa – a contextually sensitive, situationally-relative approach to what constitutes as "possible and practical" for all South Africans.

It is also worth noting that foodways in South Africa are not simply a case of white versus Black – there are, for instance, white South Africans who transform animal into meat (Ricky in Chapter 3, for example) and, as Yount-André and Zembe (2023) illustrate, there are many Black South African vegetarians and vegans. It is interesting to note that many Black vegans and vegetarians choose to adopt veganism mainly for health and environmental reasons and less so for animal advocacy. In fact, Yount-André and Zembe (2023) note that Black veganism and vegetarianism is often used as a tool of resistance against oppression.

Of course, I am not justifying or encouraging any particular foodways here. I tentatively suggest that we should all be reflexive and critical of our own foodways. As Holtzman argues (as cited in Staples & Klein, 2017: 203) "an objectified notion of 'culture' is routinely invoked both as a justification for eating or not eating particular animals or preparations, with legal protections for ‘indigenous’ practices globally accepted. ‘Culture’, again as discussed by Holtzman, can simultaneously be used as a label with which to define ‘the other’ as inferior”. While foodways are nuanced and context dependent, one thing is clear: the well-intentioned but poorly executed approach of the JCAN activists serve as an illustration of the complicated and profound roles of animals as participative agents in human world-making.

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