Veganism, Race, and Soul Food: Evaluating Reproductions of Race in Vegan Spaces

If I asked you to shut your eyes and picture something vegan, what would you imagine? Would you conjure up images of kale salad? Of rainbow, tofu-topped grain bowls, or of banana "nice cream?” If I asked you to imagine a vegan person, who would come to mind? Would it be a PETA activist protesting outside of a Canada Goose store, a yoga instructor sipping on an almond milk protein shake, or would it be a specific individual? When I type these search terms into Google Images or Shutterstock— the largest digital aggregator of stock photos— I get a pretty clear sense of what we think “vegan” looks like. It looks colorful, bright, filled with fresh fruits and vegetables. It looks skinny— plenty of slender models smiling into a salad. And as Kushbu Shah points out— it looks white. The first three pages of search results on shutterstock are entirely devoid of people of color.¹

Veganism can be a socially-fraught identity to adopt. While diet and food often implicitly form a central method of cultural adaptation and resistance, veganism stands out from other food cultures by virtue of its explicit politicization. Veganism is structurally designed as a method of resistance against what Jodey Castricano and Rasmus Simonsen refer to as “carnistic cultural norms,” and is politically positioned as an act of resistance against industrial agricultural structures that rely on animal products.² In this paper, I am drawing on these ideas to identify veganism as a political, value-laden identity, more identifiable as a distinctive food culture than

merely as a diet. I am adopting a definition of veganism that is distinct from the mere constraints of the diet; it is possible to eat a plant-based diet—one that doesn’t use any animal products—without attaching the same political connotations of “veganism” to the diet.

The politicization of veganism goes beyond its opposition to mainstream meat-eating norms; understanding veganism also means understanding issues of access to dietary staples within the vegan movement, a movement often marked in mainstream discourse as predominately middle-class. If a major triumph of the industrial food system has been making meat products widely affordable, it has triumphed at the expense of many protein substitutes. To eat vegan is to eat a diet of tofu, seitan, juices, and expensive produce. While this cultural construction fails to capture the full extent and affordability of eating a vegan diet, it does capture a major issue with veganism and accessibility: the image issue. Regardless of whether vegan diets are affordable and accessible (as vegan advocacy groups say they are), and regardless of whether vegans make up a diverse subsection of the population, veganism has a major image problem.

In this paper, I will explore this image problem. In a world deeply obsessed with the visuals of food in social and print media, the lack of representation of people of color in mainstream images of veganism has led to a cultural construction of veganism as a primarily white identity. I argue that racial dynamics are alternately reproduced, reimagined, and challenged through vegan food and vegan spaces. By evaluating what I refer to as different “visual geographies” of veganism—cookbooks, Instagram accounts, and restaurants—I will examine the ways in which veganism is constructed as a white identity by excluding the bodies,

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faces, and foods of people of color, specifically African-Americans. Through these visual
geographies, we can see how racial identities are informed and reproduced in depictions of vegan
food and vegan soul food.

To make and evaluate these claims, I am drawing on the field of visual and food
anthropology. To this end, I am following Sidney Mintz and Christine DuBois in the annual
review, the Anthropology of Food and Eating, to show that research on the anthropology of food
has traditionally drawn extensively on the “sister disciplines of sociology and history,” to
supplement cultural analysis of food.\(^5\) Analyzing culinary habits without understanding historical
and social context is near impossible, and as such, this work makes use of interdisciplinary
sources and methodologies. However, as I am mostly concerned with analyzing the
contemporary cultural contexts in which vegan and soul food intersect, I am grounding this paper
in anthropological cultural analysis, evaluating my sources as representations of the cultures they
exist within. Since I am concerned with the visual reproduction of race and power dynamics
through food, I will be analyzing and examining photographic depictions of vegan food and
consumers and social media and within cookbooks.

I am using these visual sources to examine concepts of whiteness in vegan communities.
I am using a combination of cookbooks, vegan restaurants located in Boston (Seaport, Back Bay,
and Dorchester) and Cambridge, and Instagram posts geotagged with restaurant locations to
analyze how the visual record of veganism is racialized in these spaces. To gather my research, I
have been conducting ethnographic research at five restaurants in the Boston area to examine
what physical space and belonging looks like in the vegan community. Since I am primarily

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\(^5\) For an overview of literature concerning the food anthropology, see Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois,
https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.32.032702.131011.
focused with visual representation, I am mostly concerned with how customers do or do not fit in to racialized public spaces, I am not focusing on how individuals construct identity, so much as how it is perceived. The goal is not to conflate identity with appearance, but to recognize that the visibility of brown and black bodies in public spaces contributes to the creation of visual hierarchies more fully than our individual constructions of identity do.

I would also like to take a moment in this paper to recognize my position as a white, non-vegan woman writing this. I chose this topic as a student and southerner by birth interested in food studies, and specifically interested in how white southerners often misappropriate and de-racialize soul food. Being exposed, for the first time, to many vegans in college made me realize the extent veganism is politicized. Pairing these two explicitly political, and seemingly oppositional, food cultures allows me to study how whiteness is reproduced in vegan spaces to understand how white consumers of vegan food can limit their impact. My hope is that critically evaluating where and how whiteness is formed in the vegan community will highlight pathways for resistance and engage with the work of activists who have called for “decolonizing veganism,” dismantling the systems of white supremacy and colonialism which I argue are inherent in vegan visuals. In challenging often unchallenged and unnoticed white visuals in vegan communities, I hope to help deconstruct a visual legacy built and perpetuated by white consumers and ameliorate the impacts white visuals have had on the vegan community. I am centralizing the work of vegans and people of color in my research to highlight the work of activists and authors of color.

This paper is roughly split into four sections to evaluate these claims. I begin by defining and historicizing veganism and soul food—the two major culinary identities I’m of interest to this topic. By contextualizing these identities and the ways they have been commonly
constructed, I can best evaluate their cultural relevance and impact. This section speaks to the history, politics, and current cultural context of these two identities, and explores how they intersect and how they are reproduced and reimagined in the visual record. In section two, I will then provide concrete examples of these visuals through my ethnographic descriptions of vegan restaurants in and around Boston. To continue this discussion, I will analyze the visuals of vegan southern and soul food cookbooks to see how they visually reflect vegan and soul food cultures and both challenge and reinforce the visual hierarchies embedded in presentations of veganism.

In the final section, I will offer conclusions on the creation and impact of Vegan hierarchies.

Veganism has only existed as a term since 1944, when it was coined by Donald Watson. However, this dubbing event doesn’t mark the advent of veganism, merely the advent of its codification into an independent identity.6 Vegan diets are present in some form globally, with aspects of vegan diets existing within Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, all of which discourage the consumption of animal products in some respect. Not incidentally, these religious practices are primarily practiced by people of color. Rastafarianism, too, adopts many elements of a vegan identity as a part of a rejection of unhealthy manners of living, but is based out of Jamaica exists in a different cultural context than the one I am focusing on. A survey offered by the Vegetarian Research Group identified roughly 0.5% of the United States’ population as vegan and found that people of color were actually more likely to identify as vegetarian and vegan consumers than white consumers.7 These results seem to follow from the elements of veganism and vegetarianism embedded in the non-western religious and cultural traditions I have identified, yet represent a departure from mainstream depictions of veganism (and to a lesser extent,

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6 “History.”
vegetarianism) as primarily white identities. This disparity highlights the arbitrary and politically-informed nature of white veganism; not only does it reproduce ideas of whiteness in public spaces, it does so in opposition to real demographic data. The solution to veganism’s image problem cannot simply be about increasing vegan participation in communities of color, because the problem is not demographically based.

While the majority of vegan people in the United States identify as people of color, vegan institutions have often had problems talking about and engaging with race. PETA specifically, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, often comes under fire for conflating animal rights activism with racism, homophobia, and other systemic social issues impacting people. Just recently, on December 4th, 2018, PETA was mocked across social and news media for comparing slogans such as “bringing home the bacon” to “racist, homophobic, or ableist language.” This is hardly the first time PETA has been criticized for conflating human rights with animal rights; most notably, PETA has compared the artificial insemination of dairy cows to sexual assault against women, and the caging of factory farm animals with the enslavement of African-Americans. The conflation of institutionalized systems of abuse against people with factory farming systems creates the perception that vegans, especially vegan activists, prioritize the suffering of animals over people. PETA’s activism can actively harm the vegan movement, further constructing veganism as an identity and form of activism that can only be affected by white people. Their attempts at intersectionality, rather than drawing on the interspecies approaches to solidarity outlined in Critical Perspectives on Veganism and by vegan activists of

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color, instead fetishizes and co-opt black bodies to legitimize their claims by using black bodies as props akin to the animals they advocate on behalf of.10

While it is important to acknowledge the tradition of diets without animal products in many global diets and identities, I would also argue that these diets exist outside of the limited concept of veganism seen and promoted in the United States context. Veganism, as a western construction, exists separately from plant-based diets practiced for religious and cultural reasons. To keep the scope of this paper manageable, I will limit my focus to veganism as it relates to American soul food traditions practiced by African-Americans and define both identities in an American context.

In order to more fully explore the complexities of veganism, I am contrasting veganism with a food culture that serves in many ways as its dietary opposite—soul food. Soul food serves as an apt contrast to veganism for two primary reasons: first, because soul food is commonly seen as being based on meat, butter, cream, and other animal-based products, and second, because, I argue, soul food is another example of an explicitly political food culture. Unlike the broader construction of southern food, soul food is an African-American identity borne out of the culinary legacy of the African Diaspora and created during slavery.11 It is not limited to the geographic south but is limited to people who identify as part of the African Diaspora; it is the product of two separate migrations—the forced migration of enslaved persons from Western

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10 PETA also has a history of positioning scantily clad women next to animals and pieces of meat. PETA’s problem with fetishizing marginalized groups and implicitly comparing them to animals goes beyond their language surrounding people of color, but their work with other historically marginalized groups. See Sebastian Whitaker, “Here’s 10 Outrageously Problematic Things PETA Has Done and Why You Shouldn’t Support Them,” Affinity Magazine (blog), November 26, 2017, http://affinitymagazine.us/2017/11/26/heres-10-outrageously-problematic-things-peta-has-done-and-why-you-shouldnt-support-them/.

Africa and the migration of African-Americans from the southeast to the northeast.\textsuperscript{12} Given that white people do not share in the culinary heritage of soul food, they cannot be producers of soul food. While white people produce the same dishes, it is more aptly termed southern food or comfort food, and does not share in the overtly racial connotations attached to soul food. Race is inherent in soul food. While it should not be inherent in veganism, visual cultures reproduce ideas about whiteness so thoroughly that it produces strong racial associations. The explicit racialization of soul food contrasts with the implicit racialization of veganism; veganism is implicitly racialized and marked as white as a method of exclusion, whereas soul food is racialized as a method of community celebration.

Like veganism, soul food is political. The cultural and racial meanings embedded in discussions of soul food are racialized and historically situated. While soul food has been adopted as a major point of pride and triumph in the black community, understanding its history and legacy provides an insight into its further identification with veganism. While soul food has a long history, the term “soul food” is relatively new— the distinct idea of soul food emerged as a means of celebrating African-American culinary and cultural heritage in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite its goals, soul food has not always been accepted by all of the African-American community on the basis of its dietary dimensions in particular. Looking at soul food’s historic rejections provides us with a place to see how it retains explicitly political dimensions; for instance, the Nation of Islam and other black radicals rejected soul food as a remnant of the

\textsuperscript{12} Bryant terry discusses a brief history of the term soul food in the introduction to his cookbook, Afro-Vegan, though this is a well-established historical event. It’s noteworthy that this cookbooks contextualizes the historic moment it comments on. See Bryant Terry, \textit{Afro-Vegan: Farm-Fresh African, Caribbean, and Southern Flavors Remixed} (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2014).

\textsuperscript{13} Witt, \textit{Black Hunger}.
“plantation diet.” The unhealthiness and emphasis on undesirable and unwanted cuts of meat within soul food was, to some community leaders, a further form of oppression used against black Americans, a political agenda enacted through food. In this case, a subset of the black community attempted to resist against what they perceived as oppression through the rejection of soul food and adoption of healthy, often vegetarian diets. They constructed plant-based foods as the opposite of soul food, and as a culinary culture denied to them by white southerners.15

While this rejection of soul food by the black community was relatively limited, white Americans implicitly weaponize soul food, pointing to it as the cause of systemic health problems among African-Americans. A recent study echoed these claims by demonstrating a link between obesity, high blood pressure, and heart disease that they explained through dietary choices associated with soul food culture.16 The study placed the blame for systemic health disparities among African-Americans on a centuries-old food culture that serves as the basis for the food of the entire American south. These criticisms echo those of the Black Panther Party but come from outside the community. Here, white people impose normative ideas of a good diet without respect for the community being impacted.

White Americans’ ability to simultaneously create and popularize southern food and demonize soul food demonstrates the uniquely political and racial classifications of these food pathways. White chefs and food personalities, such as Paula Deen, have profited off of their association with southern food while simultaneously voicing racist sentiments. Despite the fact that southern food was built on the backs of enslaved cooks and created by the ingenuity of

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16 Sherrie Inness, Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender, and Class at the Dinner Table, 2006 edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
African and African-American enslaved persons, white people have attempted to co-opt and claim ownership over these southern food pathways. Thus, white southern food is tied up with the legacy of racism in the southeastern United States. I propose that de-racialized conceptions of southern food that fail to recognize the contributions of African-Americans to the creation of the southern culinary identity constitute a form of culinary appropriation, which I define as an intentional misappropriation and misrepresentation of African-American food culture by nonblack entities for profit. As I will discuss later, the cookbook *Thug Kitchen* manifests the concept of this appropriation by using a combination of soul food and African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), while intentionally misleading consumers about their own race. This definition centralizes the important of food as a part of this racial construction, in opposition to Priestley et al.’s definition about literary blackface. They claim that misappropriating AAVE constitutes a form of blackface, I further argue that misappropriating culinary language and food culture further constitutes a specific form of culinary appropriation.

The visual politics of soul food and southern food are extremely important in light of the racial politics associated with them. In order to examine the whiteness of veganism and demonstrate what it looks like to veganize soul food, it is important to examine what makes a food visually “raced.” I argue that food becomes raced through the racial identities of the people near the food, through the “instagrammable” capacity of a food (defined by color, composition, and mass appeal), and through the presence or absence of a coordinated aesthetic framing of food.

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Visually creating soul food has often been a deeply racist political project. Just consider the depiction of blackface, fried chicken and watermelon side-by-side in the film *Birth of a Nation*, in which bare-footed congressmen messily eat chicken legs in the statehouse chamber. The mere presence of chitterlings—pig intestines—in the soul food lexicon is enough to get soul food a bad reputation. The process of cleaning chitterlings, removing the excrement, of cooking them—is a “filthy” one, both because it is physically dirty work and because it is historically the work of African-Americans. Attempts to reclaim and even “valorize” soul food, according to Doris Witt, still cannot erase the negative racialized visual connotations we still have with soul food, especially in a nation which points to soul food as the primary culprit in its obesity epidemic.

This idea of uncleanliness goes beyond its obvious exemplification in chitterlings and touches nearly every dish in the soul food pantheon. Kimberly Nettles explores the popular response to soul food by looking at an interaction between Al Roker and Delilah Winder, a black host of the Today show and black chef, respectively, as she instructs Roker and the audience on how to prepare the mac and cheese for a Thanksgiving dinner. Through the entire interaction, even as Winder becomes visibly uncomfortable, Roker constantly circles back to the unhealthy nature of the dishes she’s preparing. The visual juxtaposition of Roker and Winder’s dichotomous framings of soul food reflects the tension in the black community surrounding soul food as it is viewed today—as a culturally significant diet, but also as the diet that is the “prime culprit in rising rates of obesity, Type II diabetes, coronary heart disease, and hypertension.”

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20 Witt, 83.
22 Nettles.
The visuals of the segment are also the visuals of the conflict embedded in contemporary discussions of the food—the dishes are delicious, but also incredibly rich, indulgent, and dangerous. The specter of death and obesity-related disease caused by soul food becomes a part of the conversation and a part of the aesthetics of soul food, a form of both liberation and subjugation embedded in its ingredients and its appearances. I focused on reading the visual appearance of collard greens, a staple in soul food, to evaluate how this image is maintained and changed to uphold or challenge the cultural and aesthetic implications of soul food.

Bryant Terry demonstrates an intimate awareness of aesthetics in his cookbook, *Afro-Vegan*, as he attempts to define himself through his reinvented Collard Green recipe. It’s not just about putting his own culinary spin on it, but about saving it visually. In this project of “saving soul food” by making it healthy, Terry shows an uncanny awareness that the visuals of his recipes must be able to stand up as vegan food and not soul food. While the aesthetics of soul food are the aesthetics of home cooking, of dark brown slow cooked collards, mac and cheese, gravies and fried chickens, oil present and visible in every dish, Terry attempts to disassociate his food from those images to create healthier foods that fit into a more staged and thought-out aesthetic project. Instead of braising collards, he Blanches them to retain color.23 He is not shy about his attempt to refocus soul food, but it is also not incidental that he does so in a way to preserve aesthetics. As long as soul food is visually associated with uncleanliness, so too will the people who eat it.

The fraught politics surrounding the visuals of soul food stand in opposition to the visuals of mainstream ideas of vegan food. If certain prepared foods are intimately associated with soul food—collards, chitterlings, and mac and cheese, to name a few—there aren’t specific foods

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associated with veganism. Instead, veganism is associated with modes of cooking, with raw food, produce, and organic products. The aesthetic identity of veganism becomes much harder to pin down without any staple products to guide it; instead, it becomes defined by absence, by the absence of animal products, and frequently, by the absence of unhealthy foods when plant-based foods are positioned as dietary trends. By excluding the very things that make soul food “guilty” (i.e. butter and meat), veganism is ipso facto defined as healthy the same way soul food is ipso facto defined as unhealthy.

To return to my opening thoughts, when you type “soul food” into an image search engine, the results are markedly different than the results from a search for veganism. Color palates focus more on yellows and beiges and browns, the color of mac and cheese or fried chicken, with a pop of accent color coming from the dark green, almost brown, collards. Any blues or reds, any bright colors, come from table settings, from red gingham cloths and blue plates—perhaps an allusion to the Americana blue plate special? The only salads in sight are Buddha bowls, mislabeled dishes from another culinary tradition. Perhaps most concerning is the image of two hand weights wrapped with a measuring tape that a search algorithm thought fit the term “soul food.” Even here, there is no escaping the implicit labeling of soul food, and by extension, black bodies, as unhealthy.

Cookbook authors and restaurants manifest this preoccupation with visuals both through food and through broader aesthetics being packaged and sold. For cookbook authors, creating a marketable product is also contingent on creating a vibrant, attractive product. For restaurants,
customers can now be won over through an effective social media presence. Having items on the menu that are visually striking and easily instagammed can catapult a restaurant to success through the power exercised by Instagram influencers. Just look at the viral charcoal soft serve, which can now be found replicated across the country. Instagram has the ability to make even unappealing products—like black ice cream—appealing through the work of influencers and replicated posts.

In my own home town of Richmond, Virginia, Charm School Ice Cream became the pre-eminent ice cream parlor through their toasted marshmallow fluff, which still perennially pops up on my Instagram feed. That image and popularity alone was enough to attract me as a customer to the shop, in search of my own fluff-topped sundae. One of Charm School’s other, viral selling points was the abundance of vegan option (including the fluff!) that appeals to vegan Instagrammers. While their primary customer base isn’t vegan, they have found a way to appeal to both markets. As a white non-vegan, I’m consuming this trend outside of the optional vegan context. I’m not excluded by diet or by race. Vegan restaurants similarly have to use Instagram to attract non-vegan customers as well as vegan customers by making vegan food equally trendy. They have to construct a digital visual identity that’s fits into the cultural and culinary landscape. This attempt to build an inclusive brand that appeals to people regardless of dietary choices becomes exclusive through methodology. The most popular Instagram Influencers are overwhelmingly white.26 The attempt to promote a brand through visually based social media that consolidates power among white content creators necessarily creates a vegan restaurant identity meant to appeal to and be promoted by white audiences. The visuals of food, especially

in relation to its physical space, its geographic location, and the people engaging with it, provide a powerful means of examining the reproduction of political and racial dynamics in food.

Vegans of color are so left out of the mainstream aesthetics of veganism that they are forced to create new and distinct spaces. While these spaces powerfully question our raced associations with veganism through their unique and historically-embedded aesthetic depictions of food, they do so in spaces so distinct that they cannot meaningfully question the mainstream visual politics of veganism. To be clear, this is not the fault of activists, but the fault of a food culture so all-consuming in its racial politics that it excludes the bodies and faces of people of color while still maintaining the pretense of inclusion. There is nothing inherent or natural about the whitewashed aesthetics of veganism. The key to meaningful representation is realizing and undoing that aesthetic project.

I want to begin this deeper dive into culinary and geographic aesthetics with a look at vegan restaurants and their Instagram geotags in Boston, Cambridge, and Dorchester, Massachusetts. In this section, I am combining ethnographic research conducted over September-December 2018 with visual analysis of Instagram posts that bring this physical space into the digital realm in order to see how people interact in and help construct and race vegan spaces. I am primarily interested in what posts look like on Instagram geotags—are they primarily food photos or photos of people? What colors are visible? Are there any people of color visible in the images? I will follow up my ethnographic research by moving to look at how cookbook authors follow and modify many of these trends in a context more specific to vegan soul and southern food. Once again, I’m interested in colors, aesthetics, and how images across cookbooks relate to each other. What aesthetics are embedded in vegan soul food writings? While these research sites may seem disparate, they provide a range of ways to look at how we
interact with food in public and private spaces. Culinary identity reproduction takes place both through consumption—at home and in restaurants—and through production—at home, often using cookbooks as aids. Where restaurants provided examples of how vegan spaces become racialized and uphold whiteness, my cookbooks centralize the discussion of vegan food around vegan soul food and southern food, and demonstrates the continued racialization seen in this subcategory of vegan food.

For my ethnographic research, I am following on the ethnography of Sharon Zukin, *Restaurants as “Post Racial” Spaces*, to discuss the notion of the restaurant as a racial, and post-racial space. She argues that demographic transformation has complicated the way soul food restaurants must appeal to customers; even within spaces based on an explicitly raced food culture, restaurants now must perform a role that welcomes white customers, denying “African Americans’ moral ownership of the neighborhood.” How do these spaces “construct a range of possibilities for developing and performing a racialized identity?”

Where Zukin defines the traditional soul food restaurant as both a racial and a community-oriented space, only one of the restaurants I observed fits her classification; the rest exist as de-racialized spaces within predominately white neighborhoods. Where some of the restaurants Zukin details cater to a mixed clientele, they engage through an explicitly racialized food culture in a neighborhood of color. In those spaces, race is always visible, even when it is minimized to broaden commercial appeal. Yet exploring Boston’s vegan restaurants posed a difficult task, as they exist across neighborhoods and food cultures. The relative lack of vegan restaurants makes it impossible to condense the geographic area, or even stick to a certain kind

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28 Zukin.
of vegan restaurant. Instead, I focused on five intentionally distinct spaces— all distinct in location, in price point, in menu, and in aesthetics— and how they still contribute to same racial hierarchies in food, visually segregating vegan spaces and creating and normalizing a monolithic white aesthetic.

While Zukin’s work was an important basis that helped me connect racial politics through restaurants and physical space, I had an opposite challenge. By focusing on a relatively rare type of restaurant, I had to find sites that were not connected geographically. The only commonality is that they serve a menu that can be entirely veganized. For different restaurants, that looks different— by CHLOE is entirely vegan, as is FoMu and Vegan Oasis. At Veggie Galaxy, the occasional presence of cheese and eggs undermines an entirely vegan project, but everything can be substituted, and most importantly, it can be substituted at no additional charge. Forage, unlike every other restaurant, serves meat. Yet, because Forage specializes in tasting menus, ordering the vegan menu provides the same culinary experience for vegan audiences. Many of Zukin’s methodologies and questions proved useful— did this space contribute to the gentrification of the area? Is this place owned by a person of color? Is it staffed by people of color? Are their clients people of color? I explored and evaluated five restaurants and their presence via Instagram geotags to look at how they uphold ideas of whiteness in the vegan community through their physical presence. I viewed minimalistic, trendy, colorful imagery as a primarily white aesthetic due the associations minimalism has traditionally had with privileged classes. Minimalism associates whiteness, simplicity, and wealth, with value, leaving out people who don’t fit this aesthetic goal. I am also looking for the creation of a racialized identity through food, but one made mainly through more implicit associations of whiteness. The racial
politics of veganism are constructed through the absence of black bodies in vegan spaces and through the cultivation of aesthetics frequently coded as white.

If these spaces are idealized as post-racial— they don’t formally exclude customers of color, and nominally exist within a diet— they do little to promote any color-consciousness in their spaces. Instead, they supposedly exist outside of racial hierarchies, outside of racial narratives. Restaurants are rarely activist, even when they dabble in politics. They require the generation of profit, and in a culture that implicitly associated veganism with whiteness, white restauranteurs have little incentive to attempt to explore and create new markets when there is already a well-established whitewashed model for a vegan restaurant. There is nothing excluding non-white customers, nothing explicitly naming white customers as the targeted demographic except the conformance to mainstream minimalist aesthetics, the rebranding of foods from communities of color as “superfoods,” and the continued absence of people of color from vegan visuals.

My first location, FoMU, is not, strictly speaking, a restaurant. It is an ice cream store that serves all-vegan ice cream, mostly made from coconut milk, though sometimes also made using avocado, fruit, cashew, or almond bases. Nothing here comes from animal products—including the baked goods they sell— but their website and promotional materials opt to use “plant-based” instead of “vegan” terminology. Right off the bat, this raised an alarm in my head, a subtle signal that this spot was more about trends and the environment than about people and ethics. Considering that I was going to their location in Back Bay (one of three), located on Newbury Street, I expected a white, affluent audience.

I was right. The shop was not busy when we walked in, in the late afternoon on a Friday, the excursion only a quick trip into the city. After we placed our order and received our ice
cream at a wooden counter with a glass screen separating us from the array of vegan baked goods, we sat down at a bench against the grey and beige walls. Succulents dotted the room, and light poured in through the front windows. There was not much seating in the small space, so I took up residence with my friend on the lone, long bench, watching the customers coming in and out as I slowly sipped my quickly-melting drink and kept up a friendly conversation on this project and vegan ethics. I kept note of the people moving in and out. Since I’m evaluating the construction of race in a visual context, again, I’m mostly concerned with the visuals of race, I’m more concerned with how race is performed and identified in public spaces. Instead of using racial markers, I’m going to be focusing on whether people are visibly dark skinned or white-passing, to focus on how race is visibly seen in public spaces. I noted no dark-skinned customers— myself and my vegan friend included— which, after looking over several pages of Instagram geotags, seemed to follow from the shop’s visual identity. While a majority of FoMU’s Instagram posts feature just the ice cream sitting on the counter, of the three dozen most recent posts I looked at featuring people, none contained any dark-skinned customers. In the middle of the shopping district of a wealthy neighborhood, selling an expensive (for what it is) product, the crushing presence of white, aesthetically-curated female Instagrammers was not surprising. All in all, I spent close to ten dollars on my milkshake. For ice cream, this was even more cost exclusive than most, fulfilling the stereotype than veganism is cost exclusive. For vegans who want to eat out, it is.

By CHLOE, a vegan fast-casual chain based out of New York, but with 15 locations in New York, Boston, LA, and London, is the most immediately-recognizable of the restaurants I visited as quintessentially vegan. It is also definitely vegan— its founder, Chloe Coscarelli (who
has since broken with the company over the restaurant’s vegan identity), labels her foods as explicitly vegan, rather than plant-based, like FoMu.29

The restaurant, in Boston’s seaport district, is not easily accessible by public transit, so we walked about 15 minutes on a sunny day from the nearest stop on Boston’s metro system—not inaccessible for people who rely on public transit, but not in the most accessible part of town. The restaurant itself is pretty large, very bright and airy, with a large central window, white-washed brick walls offset against pale blue drywall, distressed, white and brown alternating wood floors, and wire chairs. The space is inviting and bright, but also very contemporary—the succulents, high ceilings, and fake distressed minimalism ensure that effect. The menu branding, too, is very minimalist—black backgrounds with fun, white line illustrations and language. Picking out a table tucked into the front corner, we walked back to the counter and ordered a vegan “meatball” sub, mac and “cheese” with mushroom “bacon,” a taco salad, and a smoothie bowl. This is pretty standard for the menu, which lacks any real theme other than color and health (or the illusion of it). The food was instantly instagrammable, all brightly colored and neatly presented. The food was expensive for what it was, and for a fast-casual lunch, it was well over 15/person. There was a hanging chair in the front window, unoccupied by any customers, that was the perfect backdrop for a glamorous photo. When I scrolled through the Instagram geotag, nearly every person-centered photo was taken there. Not incidentally, nearly everyone in these photos were white-passing.

I camped out at my table, taking notes on my laptop, as I watched the flow of customers. The place was never packed, but never totally empty, with more women than men. In the two or three hours I was there, I saw no people of color other than the employees, who were nearly all

dark skinned. Especially in Boston’s Seaport, a pretty high end commercial neighborhood catering primarily to white customers, this was not surprising, but the juxtaposition of well-clad white-passing customers, several in suits, stopping by for a quick lunch, with service workers of color exemplified the conflicts I expected to see going into my research: people of color were not absent, but they were invisible, negligible, constructed not as consumer citizens, but as workers unable to interact with the product. The juxtaposition is jarring, emblematic of the growing disparities among service workers and customers, and emblematic of a construction of vegan restaurants that caters to white, affluent audiences.

On Instagram, this trend remained. By CHLOE’s feed featured many more faces, posing in the hanging chair, or arm around friends at a table laid with rainbow vegan foodstuffs. Their digital representation was more diverse than FoMu’s-- I counted four dark skinned people of color among the last several months of depicted customers, but the images still felt overwhelmingly white, especially because we associate the visuals of salads and vegan foods with white consumers. The images of food and the restaurant’s minimalism did more to contribute to the dialogues of whiteness on social media than to challenge it, especially since service workers are rendered totally invisible on social media. Here, the food and the patrons exist in a carefully curated vacuum, where aesthetics matter and people of color don’t.

One of the two traditionally sit-down restaurants I visited was Veggie Galaxy— a classic, space-themed, vegetarian and vegan diner. The interior is all chrome and Formica, vinyl booths and milkshakes and fries. The diner vibe evokes plenty of nostalgia in me, as my favorite spot to hang with friends back home— Galaxy Diner— is also a space-themed diner. Veggie Galaxy is not an exclusively vegan restaurant— they serve eggs and cheese— but their entire menu can be made vegan, and the default for everything on the menu but the egg-based dishes is already
vegan. Veggie Galaxy is a popular, crowded spot located in Central Square—when I went, at 4:45 on a Saturday to beat the dinner rush, the place was almost entirely packed. I slipped into a booth in the back corner (the only available remaining table) and watched as a line began to form out the door.

Even at 5pm on a Friday, the crowd was mostly young adults, as the crowds in Central Square have always appeared to me to trend. All but one of the servers I saw were white-passing, and a fair number of the customers were, too. The racial makeup of the customers of Veggie Galaxy was still disproportionately white-passing, but seemed to be the most balanced demographically, although I use that term loosely; I saw perhaps five or six black or brown dark-skinned customers. The diner is “trendy” in a very different way than By CHLOE, and the styles that the customers represented were profoundly different. For one, there were definitely more male customers, and more women customers with short hair. It is also pertinent to note that the day I conducted my ethnography, Veggie Galaxy had a sign outside affirming their welcoming of people of all “races, religions, countries of origins, genders, sexual orientations, and abilities.” In that sense, it is visually self-constructed as a progressive space, but it feels progressive in the way many white progressives are—the inclusivity is rarely actualized as the spaces remain white dominated.

If I was encouraged by the explicitly political language of inclusivity used by Veggie Galaxy—which, I might add, splashes the word “vegan” across the menu—the Instagram geotag was disappointing. There were four people of color visible within the past six months of posts, and plenty of food pictures. Veggie Galaxy is also Instagrammable, but not in the way By CHLOE is. Instead, the Instagram is covered with fried food, desserts, and greasy diner favorites, all very classic Americana food made vegan. While Veggie Galaxy does not try to replicate the
minimalist aesthetics of Forage, ByCHLOE, and FoMu that I argue make their spaces so white, the nostalgia of the all-American diner is unquestionably a whitewashed image, too. Where Veggie Galaxy tries to be more politically and socially aware, their failings to trouble the visual vegan narrative are all the more striking.

I visited Forage as my last location, a capstone meal for the end of my semester. A group of four of us went to do their “meatless Monday” tasting menu, a 6-course vegan or vegetarian tasting menu for $40, the normal cost of their four-course tasting menu. We went at 7:30pm on a Friday, one of seven tables with people at it. There was not a lot of movement—not a lot of people going to and from, possibly because the tasting menu is a 3-hour endeavor; many groups were seated around the time we were seated and left around the time we left. While the restaurant was not full, it was at least half-filled, which was pretty good for a small restaurant late on a Monday. The interior is very elegant, once again leaning towards a minimalist design. The lighting was low, the tables dark wood, and the walls white, except for a dark teal accent wall. The water is brought to the table in big glass bottles. The space was very cozy and elegant, the exact kind of trendy location you’d expect to serve a “reasonably priced” (40/person) tasting menu in Cambridge. Most of the patrons appeared to be young professionals, with an older couple or two thrown in. The menu itself is trendy to the point of being indecipherable—if I hadn’t ordered the tasting menu and left the choice of dishes up to someone else, I would have had to decipher words like “maltagliati” and “aquavit.”

This was by far the most expensive restaurant on my list. The dishes were complex, the flavors foreign (I had my first pickled chicken mushroom), and the pairings unique—the dessert featured clementine, cumin, and chocolate. Everything about the restaurant felt exclusive and self-aware in its classiness. The presentation was too precise, everything strangely carefully-
curated way, perfectly styled for an Instagram post about your effortless night out. It would not be very difficult to feel like an outsider here. I was the only one of my friends at the who even knew what a tasting menu was, nonetheless who had been to one before. If you don’t understand how one works, if you don’t have the cultural capital to navigate a class exclusive place if you don’t know how to navigate such an exclusive and class-marked space, the dinner could easily become uncomfortable— too foreign—rather than fun and exciting. In such a class marked space, it also becomes a racially marked space, due to our tacit associations between whiteness and wealth.

It is no coincidence that there were no black or brown customers or workers within Forage. There were several people of color—two tables of patrons visibly of Asian descent—no dark-skinned customers. It was not a space that felt even remotely inclusive, tucked a long walk from Harvard square in the middle of a wealthy residential area, with a minimalist aesthetic that felt too expensive to comfortably exist within. Seeing how these dynamics played out on Instagram was interesting because the Instagram was even more food-focused than the others—there were fewer people visible, demonstrating an emphasis on food as a social marker. As a less well known location—it’s not part of a chain, or a cult location within the city—what defines it is the high class presentation and the performative nature of the tasting menu. The high-class nature of the menu, the trendy farm-to-table ethos demands the instgramming of an experience, not just a digitial visual of a place. One of the three dark-skinned people on the Instagram geotag was Rep. John Lewis who hosted a fundraising dinner there during a speaking engagement at Harvard. That experience, however, is more marked by a rarefied social class and standing than by race. Most people are either priced out of the experience or lack the cultural capital to fully engage with this experience or even really know how to find it.
Oasis Vegan Veggie Parlor is the only location on this list owned by people of color, located in a majority-minority neighborhood (Dorchester), and visibly frequented by people of color. It also markets itself a soul food restaurant, serving primarily foods inspired by West African, Caribbean, and southern food pathways. In addition to their hot foods, they serve smoothies and juices, which is more in line with the traditional vegan restaurant.

The aesthetics of Oasis are unlike the aesthetics of any other restaurant I visited; there was no overpriced minimalism, no carefully-curated menu font, no attempt at recreating a classic diner feel. Instead, it is a small space, not quite cramped, and brightly colored. The menu is flimsy, large and printed overhead, the stew options of the day laid out in small bowls on the counter, clamshell sizes marked up with prices hanging on the wall. The walls are painted in bright greens, oranges, blues, a couple of mix matched tables. There is only one woman working, decked out in a head wrap that manages to match the colors on the wall. Underneath the counter are flyers, posters, business cards for community events and businesses. It is the only space I went to that has a visible dedicated community board, the only space that actually felt embedded in and cognizant of the community.

The owner was incredibly friendly. She greeted us, immediately identifying us as outsiders, newcomers to the space, not yet versed in the language of the space. She walked us through the menu, explaining the unfamiliar, primarily Ethiopian, dishes. It was by far the cheapest meal— for a generous filling of food, we spent less than $10/person. For Boston, this was more than reasonable. For the hour or so we sat in the small space, eating our early dinner, around two dozen customers—none of whom were white or white-passing— came in and out. The shop’s worker— who identified herself as one of the owners— greeted many by name and by order— do you want one burrito, or two? The sense of place was so apparent in the space in a
way I hadn’t seen anywhere else, where the place—urban, wealthy, commercial districts—only served to reinforce whiteness and exclusivity.

The food on Oasis Vegan Veggie Parlor’s Instagram geotag is also pretty colorful, but it’s also very visually distinct than that of By CHLOE. First of all, it’s served in a recyclable cardboard clamshell container, and the colors are the dark muted colors of slow cooked lentils and Ethiopian stews. The different foods kind of blend together, and while it still looks appetizing, it also doesn’t look overdone. Taste isn’t sacrificed for aesthetics, but the aesthetics also don’t encourage instgramming— they aren’t bright, carefully-constructed, and visibly stunning. It is good food, at a reasonable price point, accessible to a community traditionally excluded from vegan narratives.

The refusal to buy into these whitewashed aesthetics, while allowing Oasis to maintain culinary and community authenticity, also fails to bring these spaces centered around people of color into the visual social-media mainstream. Their goals as a community-oriented space are maintained, providing an explicit alternative to white-coded vegan spaces. But customers have to seek out these spaces, because they are so invisible on classic vegan promotion Instagrams and by vegan influencers. Even when creating more inclusive spaces, they remain left out of mainstream dialogues. This is the inherent flaw in the construction of vegan spaces within white aesthetics: providing recognition for Oasis under current visual cultures would require rewriting the aesthetics of the space in a way that would then whitewash the space— the only way to integrate it into the mainstream is to re-envision what makes a space vegan. Vegan restaurants where people of color are present are still ignored by broader vegan structures. By existing in separate spaces, they render vegan people of color invisible, and wash over diverse food cultures with vegan and plant-based traditions.
With the exception of Vegan Oasis Kitchen, dark skinned people of color, specifically black and African-American consumers, were largely absent both from vegan physical spaces and from their visual digital reproductions. This exclusion on large-scale social media platforms combined with the physically exclusive spaces, creates unwelcoming environments more likely to perpetuate vegan hierarchies than to challenge them, creating a landscape with such an obvious bias it is clear that challenging veganism and whiteness has to go beyond welcoming more vegans of color and move towards creating more intentionally welcoming spaces outside of heavily-white areas. It means more restaurants owned by people of color, providing them with the moral ownership of the space white people receive elsewhere.\textsuperscript{30}

While being vegan is obviously not dependent on participation in these or any spaces (in my next section I’ll look at other forms of participation in veganism), and participation in these spaces doesn’t assume veganism, what these spaces contribute to is a public belief about what makes up “veganism.” It is difficult to talk about how people enact veganism inside their own homes, but easier to see that enactment through public spaces. The creation of identity is largely a public process of construction and reconstruction, and the creation of a vegan identity and vegan subculture is dependent on the existence of these institutions, and on the spread of the popularity of these institutions through aesthetically-focused social media. That studies suggest that people of color participate in veganism at a statistically higher level does not matter if they are absent from the visual record, when we have so many power structures that already systematically exclude and delegitimize voices and bodies of color. Especially for white and non-vegan consumers, it’s easy to enter into these spaces and assume that veganism is a white identity, even if that’s untrue. There’s no mainstream way to challenge the narrative.

\textsuperscript{30} Zukin, “Restaurants as ‘Post Racial’ Spaces. ‘Soul Food’ and Symbolic Eviction in Bedford-Stuyvesant (Brooklyn).”
Next, I’m going to be looking at how cookbooks offer a separate pathway to evaluate the visual politics and pathways offered within veganism. Sites of food production primarily take place within two distinct realms: in restaurants, as I explored above, and within the home. At home, people have the added ability to find and create distinct culinary identities. In Sherrie Inness’s *Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender and Class at the Dinner Table*, Inness contends that the process of creating political identities plays out at home through the use of cookbooks. Cookbooks are a key site of identity creation, in the home cook’s ability to use, change, and repurpose a recipe.31 And unlike Instagrams and restaurants, whose meaning is almost entirely determined visually, the cookbook is both image- and text-based. As physical items, cookbooks are also key pieces of material culture that facilitate cultural interaction through food. The work of documenting and writing a culinary catalogue of certain food culture is not always dissimilar from the work of an anthropologist, recording in print different food cultures.

Today, a good cookbook is about far more than just good recipes. While *The Guardian* caricatured the trends in modern cookbook writing as trite and unoriginal, some key points remain. Today, cookbooks are written as much to be as they are to be used readable and visually appealing. A good contemporary cookbook is an aesthetically-pleasing text that fits the generic trends: a quirky writing style and an approachable voice.32 It can be read for recipes, but also as an indicator of contemporaneous aesthetics and social interests, an indicator of food pathways. We engage with cookbooks as didactic texts, but also as creative and cultural texts that shape our understanding of our interactions with food and that are representative of authors and the cultures

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31 For more on this topic see [Citation] *Secret Ingredients - Race, Gender, and Class at the Dinner Table* | S. Inness | Palgrave Macmillan, accessed December 27, 2018, //www.palgrave.com/us/book/9781403970084.
they represent. How cookbook authors frame their work is specific to our current cultural context—that vegan soul food cookbooks exists speaks to a fast-growing cookbook market that favors many niches. The introduction to each cookbook provides the author the opportunity to make their goals and their story in the cookbook explicit, yet, as I explore, sometimes what is unspoken—race and politics, namely-- can be equally important.

For this paper, I looked at five cookbooks of vegan soul and southern food—Sweet Potato Soul, Vegan Soul Kitchen, Afro-Vegan, Cookin’ Crunk, and Thug Kitchen. Of these cookbooks, Sweet Potato Soul, Vegan Soul Kitchen, and Afro-Vegan are written by African-American authors, while Cookin’ Crunk and Thug Kitchen are written by white authors. These books, despite their tendency to root themselves in place—namely, in the south—are nonetheless as geographically dislocated as Instagram posts, accessible without respect to place. Bryant Terry, in Afro-Vegan, specifically addresses that while he adopts a broad geographic scope, his work is for everyone, accessible without physical presence in those spaces or without physical presence in the communities that abide by those traditions.33 Thus, the attention to regional food pathways and attention to regional dishes is accessible by consumers across the country—the chance to produce vegan “soul food” is offered to anyone who purchases the book. The role cookbooks and their authors play in the kitchen of a home cook—as a guide, a confidant, an exotic alternative to the everyday—must, on some level, exist outside of race, gender, and space in order to attract a wide enough audience. We demand multicultural confessional works that allow the reader to consume different identities and try on different hats. Bryant Terry’s cookbook, despite advocating explicitly for a vegan diet, includes a clause that explains how his work appeals to “vegans, vegetarians, and omnivores alike.”34 Yet, each author must also identify

33 Terry, Afro-Vegan.
34 Terry.
themselves in distinct enough terms to be a legible personality. Interestingly, the authors of color I looked at were far more willing to politicize their work, digging deep into history, tradition, and the politics of food, while nonetheless aiming to be approachable.

Bryant Terry’s works provide a clear example of this dichotomy. Bryant Terry is a chef and activist from Memphis, TN, and is one of the leading chefs of vegan soul food. His background as an activist and food scholar is present in his books, which articulates how vegan soul food is historically constructed. Instead of pretending that he is reinventing the wheel with “nouveau soul food,” a term increasingly adopted by health advocates focusing on making soul food healthier, he focuses on the plant-based roots of soul food. Following on the historic background I provided previously, he moves away from processed, fat-based foods often conflated with soul foods and recognizes the full range of “African heritage diet,” which he cites as inspiration in his book. For Terry, writing cookbooks is a deeply personal act for a community and an extension of his work as a food justice activist. He views his book as one that will “empower people to choose wholesome foods to improve the physical and spiritual health of their families and communities.” While his language is broad enough to be inclusive, it’s clear that his work is first and foremost one dedicated to the struggles and triumphs of the African Diaspora, as seen through its culinary heritage. His identity, manifested in the cookbook, is political.

The other preeminent black vegan cookbook author is Jenné Clairborne, author of Sweet Potato Soul, released in February of 2018 based on her popular blog of the same name. She opens with, “I’ve been asked if it’s difficult to be a vegan from the south,” before going on to

36 Terry, Afro-Vegan.
37 Terry.
wax poetic about scratch cooking, regional produce, and family traditions. If her work starts out in far broader terms than Terry’s, which immediately narrows in on the book’s focus on foods of the African Diaspora before adding a note of welcome, Clairborne does the opposite. She finds commonality before she breaks from it, tells stories about family and her own path to veganism before making explicit the book’s connection to blackness. She maps black culinary traditions, provides her own definition of soul food, and asserts veganism’s place in a soul food narrative. She envisions vegan food as part of a solution to health disparities in the African-American community, and focuses heavily on the dietary benefits of veganism, but doesn’t shy away from ethical discussions. For Clairborne, veganism, as a political identity, is necessarily intersectional; in interviews, she has stated that “all factions of veganism, in my opinion, should be about empathy towards every person.” Her belief that “veganism is not just about animals,” is central to her claims about the importance of soul food in a vegan narrative. Her focus might be flipped to center more on broadly-relatable storytelling, but she also makes it clear that her work as a woman of color and as a vegan activist is deeply intertwined.

Terry and Clairborne, by creating healthy vegan soul food, resist the mainstream discourses that label soul food as unhealthy by identifying it within a movement commonly seen as inherently healthy. Following Kimberley Nettles, the work of chefs, cookbook authors, and Instagram influencers such as Terry Bryant and Jenné Clairborne, is “Saving Soul Food,” finding ways to popularize it and divorce it from connotations of soul food as unhealthy without divorcing it from its historical roots.

39 Claiborne.
40 Nettles, “‘Saving’ Soul Food.”
In fact, the work of African-American vegan authors often functions to explicitly situate itself within a historic context that celebrates soul food’s history and aligns it with a plant-based diet. Rather than finding ways to replace dairy and meat, they embrace traditional African-American food pathways and discuss the legume-rich roots of the soul food diet. Instead of limiting themselves by the pre-existing “unhealthy” visuals of soul food, they challenge the origins of those ideas. Terry Bryant, when providing his recipe for collards, is deeply aware of the normal visual associations of collard greens and explicitly counters it with a recipe meant to maintain color and visual appeal on the plate.\(^{41}\) Veganizing soul food is a way of popularizing it, normalizing it, historicizing it, and ultimately envisioning a clear future for soul food not limited by negative stereotypes.

However, white vegan southern-food cookbooks demonstrate how the experiences of black vegan activists are further racialized when evaluated in comparison to white southern vegan authors. While the number of vegan southern and soul food cookbooks is already very small, the differences between cookbooks authored by white and black authors are pronounced. The cookbook *Cookin’ Crunk* shows a more limited preoccupation with elements of health, instead identifying points of indulgence. *Cookin’ Crunk* focuses on veganizing more classic southern foods, like mac and cheese, pies, and dessert. She is already aware that veganism is associated with healthiness, so she instead focuses on disassociating her food with traditional associations of health and veganism. Her privilege as a white vegan is that she is entitled to unhealthy food. She doesn’t have to justify, or save, southern food, because southern food is not blamed for a series of systemic health problems. Her veganism doesn’t need to be healthy, because as a white author, she doesn’t have to prove her belonging in the vegan community. She

\(^{41}\) Terry, *Afro-Vegan.*
benefits from the pre-existing associations of veganism and whiteness as healthy, and thus can freely give unhealthy recipes without justification. She breaks outside of the traditional vegan mold in a way that becomes limiting, rather than expansive, by reinforcing the link between southern food (and by extension, soul food) and overindulgence. Her goal is to prove that the same greasy, fried, cheesy dishes of the south can be made vegan, without sacrificing taste or calorie count.

Admittedly, *Thug Kitchen*, written by two white authors, directly uses veganism as a proxy for health (and health as a proxy for veganism). The goal of veganizing southern food (and the other food cultures sprinkled throughout the cookbook) is to turn away from processed foods towards plant-based whole foods. They do not directly criticize, or even necessarily associate, southern food as unhealthy, mostly because their construction of southern food is the most non-specific, non-regional. Unlike every other cookbook I looked at, which are written by southerners, *Thug Kitchen* is written by two Portlanders roughly appropriating both AAVE and the foods they associate with the linguistic pattern.

*Thug Kitchen* is the only vegan cookbook I encountered in my research that never included the word “vegan,” or even draws attention to animal advocacy in the book. Nonetheless, *Thug Kitchen* holds the honor of being one of the best-selling vegan cookbooks of all time, perhaps explicitly because it depoliticizes the radical politics of veganism. By framing the conversation around “plant-based” diets, they use veganism to discuss a dietary consciousness of fresh food pathways and cooking techniques, instead of historic culinary traditions and animal ethics.\(^\text{42}\) This is all good economics, because it manages to appeal to the widest possible audience and doesn’t risk alienating readers with any politically-embedded

words. If the language surrounding veganism has “political potential,” the language of *Thug Kitchen* strips it of these discourses and replaces them with exclusive ideas that give their food higher cultural capital. Cookbooks like *Sweet Potato Soul* and *Vegan Soul Kitchen*, by invoking the dual identifiers of race and veganism, alienate readers who don not identify within these culinary traditions, while *Thug Kitchen* casts a wide net by depoliticizing its goal.

The ways that *Thug Kitchen* appeals to such a wide audience, however, are suspect at best. *Thug Kitchen* is very non-nonsense, and speaks to you as such, with a heavy dose of slang and cursing. Salads become “Plant nachos.” A page on herbs is entitled “Herbal Haze.” It is worth further exploring the use of AAVE within *Thug Kitchen*, though many authors have written more extensively on this topic than I have. When the authors of the then-blog were “outed” as a wealthy white couple, Michelle Davis and Matt Holloway, many commentators decried “thug kitchen” as an offense misappropriation of black language and cultural markers. Prior to this revelation in an *epicurious.com* blog post, the heavy use of swearing, slang abbreviations, selective dropping of articles and verbs attempted to code the blog’s owner as a person of color. For one black food commentator, they imagined “a calorie-conscious, gangly young black man who’s particularly vehement about clean eating, insistently tapping recipes into his blog while Dead Prez reverberates in the background.” For black members of the food community, the visibility of *Thug Kitchen* seemed, initially, “refreshing.” The revelation of authorship was all the more damaging because *Thug Kitchen* had started to gain traction as a mainstream example of a black culinary consciousness that existed both within and apart from

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43 *Kitchen.*


classic ideas of soul food. Instead, *Thug Kitchen* not only failed that goal, but used black identity as a marketing ploy, dressing up stereotypes with fresh foods. Using the word “Thug,” in its brand is especially suspect because it plays into racist stereotypes of young black men as uneducated and violent.46

For these reasons, many commentators have identified *Thug Kitchen* as a form of blackface. Alexis Priestly, Sarah Lingo, and Peter Royal discuss the implications of *Thug Kitchen*’s “linguistic blackface,” arguing that, “the tropes embedded in their language point to broader cultural issues concerning power, oppression, and patterns of consumption,” using linguistic anthropological methods. Despite employing AAVE, the trailer produced for the cookbook portraying middle-class white people “delivering profanity madden lines in a deadpan tone” points to an almost explicitly white audience by only using suburban white people in the trailer.47 *Thug Kitchen* provides a way for middle-class but culinarily-deprived white consumers to play with veganism and blackness within their own home. It is not an authentic and playful presentation of food, it is “a way to perpetrate decontextualized stereotypes and project an image of black people that fits the desire of anti-black individuals.”48

I would like to take these criticisms and extend them to the less popular and prominent *Cookin’ Crunk*, briefly discussed above. If less obvious about the use of AAVE, the cookbook nonetheless draws a title from a term popularized in southern hip-hop circles. While, unlike the authors of *Thug Kitchen*, Bianca Phillips is southern and can claim some culinary connection to these foods, that connection is conflated with ownership.49 When paired with the use of

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46 Priestley, K. Lingo, and Royal, “‘The Worst Offense Here Is the Misrepresentation.’”
47 Priestley, K. Lingo, and Royal.
48 Priestley, K. Lingo, and Royal.
problematic language, *Cookin’ Crunk* is, in some ways, equally problematic because it manages to further white claims of ownership over southern food without giving due credit to soul food cultures. Especially when the introduction is paired with the introduction of *Sweet Potato Soul* and *Afro-Vegan*, the lack of historicization and politicization is stark. There is no attempt to examine the history making her work possible; there is no discussion of how veganism can be especially fraught in the south, only a generic blurb about her love of cooking and journey to be a vegan. Seeing the depoliticized nature of southern food I defined above enacted in this space makes sense, but is also a privilege for the author to present her work without rigorously contextualizing and defining it. She does not have to explain her culinary heritage, she does not have to create a space for herself within the vegan community. Her visual belonging is all but assured.

What cookbooks provide that restaurants do not, is a geographically dislocated chance at participation, a visual culture brought into the home and more fully realized by a variety of participants. The growing number of cookbooks being published enable more diverse narratives and have given more of a space to authors of color, diversifying the visual landscape, but only in a limited capacity. As cookbooks like *Thug Kitchen* continue to proliferate, and as the industry remains over 80% white, authentic visual representations can only do so much, especially as those authors are implicitly held to different standards.\(^5\) As food historian Michael Twitty argues, *Thug Kitchen* is about the privilege afforded to white people to create explicit and racially-tinged culinary narratives, to engage publicly in veganism in ways denied to people of

color. Broadly speaking, this privilege is embedded across the visual landscape—the privilege to exist and to create pathways of existence that centralize and reproduce whiteness.51

The burden to fix this problem cannot lie on people of color alone. I have looked at spaces and places that centralize these experiences, yet they do little to permeate a culture of visual whiteness that remains untouched, if not unchallenged, by alternative presentations. Uplifting the works of writers and chefs of color must go hand in hand with dismantling structures already in place. We must unpack how we got to a point that enables the dominance of a white narrative and makes invisible people of color in vegan spaces. The efforts of activists of color have significantly raised the profile for vegans of color. Without the popularity of Jenné Clairborne’s blog, Sweet Potato Soul, her cookbook wouldn’t have been possible. Popular food sites—FoodRepublic, Thrillist, and Epicurious, among them—have all decried the race problems facing veganism and highlighted the work of activists looking to “decolonize veganism”—make practicing vegan more accessible and more culturally-sustainable.52 For activists like Dr. A. Breeze Harper, who focuses on highlighting intersectionality and the lives of vegan women of color, this process of making veganism more culturally sustainable and accessible is her life’s work.53

The mere existence of these authors is not enough to dismantle systems of whiteness and white supremacy embedded in vegan spaces. The segregation inherent in the aesthetics of veganism should not be the burden of authors of color engaging with authentic portrayals of

traditional food cultures. The only fault with their aesthetics is their resistance to hegemonic portrayals of veganism as trendy, minimalistic food culture, their resistance to portrayals of veganism that de-racialize it even as they code it with white aesthetics. Creating a more inclusive model of veganism is a complex project that must go beyond allowing people of color to exist by creating separate spaces for engagement—it necessarily has to entail dismantling our visual structures of veganism and allowing multiple modes of veganism to exist in the same space. It is not just about creating spaces for vegans of color but about creating a new approach to veganism that normalizes the contributions of vegans of color in all their forms and stops rewarding literary and culinary blackface in the community. Veganism has enough white narratives, and if the community is dedicated to the intersectional activism many envision, people have to find the space to reject, decentralize, and deconstruct the work of white vegans who profit off of the foods of people of color. We have to dismantle systems of whiteness and white supremacy currently inherent in the visuals of veganism in order to make them more inclusive.

I hope that evaluating how veganism becomes a white identity will provide an understanding of how food cultures are created and raced, and how racial power dynamics are created, challenged, and maintained in culinary communities. Making visible the invisible structures that underlie vegan spaces provides a chance to see how power is constructed and communicated through food.
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