Witnesses to the future:

philosophical belief in the digital encounter

Kim Harding

Goldsmiths, University of London

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Declaration of authorship

I, Kim Harding, declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

Witnesses to the Future investigates how a philosophical belief is acquired, formed and transmitted. It employs ethical veganism as a case study, in the wake of a legal judgement in Great Britain (*Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* 2020) that recognised ethical veganism as a protected characteristic, under the religion or belief section of the Equality Act 2010. The research is guided by two central questions: how is ethical veganism, as a philosophical belief, brought into being and to what extent is it shaped by media practices? Drawing on witnessing theory and affect theory, the research shows how this philosophical belief is lived, embodied and has the capacity to be performative. Through establishing the figure of the witness, the thesis argues that the circulation of affect in vegan testimony is integral to the process of becoming vegan and subsequently transmitting this philosophical belief to potential co-witnesses. Vegan testimonies – such as the work of activist content creators – are sensory encounters that invite and mobilise the moral engagement of others. Veganism, as a philosophical belief, is shaped by affective encounters with non-human animals, which break the boundaries between human and non-human bodies. Following this, vegans communicate the relationality of human and non-human bodies in the affective transmission of their beliefs. The thesis also argues that this philosophical belief's testimony is oriented towards the future in its promise of transformation, which communicates the potential of remaking the self and remaking the world. In their affective relationship to the future, ethical vegans experience the co-existence of hope with despair. Thus, in confronting anthropocentrism and radically de-centring humans, a vegan future entails engagement with uncertainty. The research is a timely sociological contribution to recent developments in equalities legislation. Additionally, the thesis also addresses a research gap between digital religion and non-religion scholarship.

Contents

1 Overview of the thesis

1.1 Research questions and methodology

Witnesses to the Future investigates how veganism as a philosophical belief is acquired, formed and transmitted. It is guided by two central research questions: how is this belief brought into being and to what extent is it shaped by one's interactions with social media? The early stages of the research project involved considering how to research the complexities of the non-religion category. This led to narrowing the focus of the research to an investigation of philosophical belief, choosing veganism as a case study. This decision was made in the wake of a legal judgement in Great Britain that recognised ethical veganism as a protected characteristic, *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* (2020), under the religion or belief section of the Equality Act 2010. Investigating veganism as a philosophical belief contributes to researching the complexity and dynamism of non-religion as a category, while also employing non-religion as a placeholder category that facilitates empirical work (Lee 2015b: 194). As a timely sociological contribution to recent developments in equalities legislation, an important contribution of this research is to show that vegans' philosophical beliefs illustrate the cogency, cohesion and importance of philosophical belief as a substantial aspect of human life and behaviour, as defined in the Equality Act 2010 and applied in *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* (2020).

1.2 Methods and theory

In seeking to understand how veganism as a philosophical belief is shaped by what one sees and does online, the research for this project employed digital ethnographic fieldwork, including 24 semi-structured interviews with vegan content creators and vegans who engage with social media content relating to their philosophical belief. I came to the topic of research as a non-vegan encountering vegan and animal-rights social media content for the first time. Engaging with the embodied intensity of this content through fieldwork informed my analysis of vegan belief as relational, performative and affective. This philosophical belief is formed and transmitted through what I call the digital sensory encounter, a mediatised mode of testimony through which individuals bear witness to the suffering of animals and later transmit vegan belief to potential co-witnesses. The digital sensory encounter

also carries the potential of transformation: to transform oneself into a vegan subject and to create a vegan world. As a researcher, I did not experience the same transformation that was related to me by informants and transmitted to me through the digital sensory encounter in fieldwork. While I recognised oppression, I did not take action upon it. This experience resulted in positioning myself as a failed witness who did not act on the knowledge that I had acquired by becoming vegan myself. The recognition of this failure shaped how I positioned myself in relation to the object of my research. Subsequently, the thesis draws on theoretical perspectives of witnessing to observe how vegans' philosophical beliefs are strongly rooted in action. These beliefs are also performative acts of bearing witness, which respond to trauma and seek to moralise the future actions of others. Moreover, the thesis argues that affect is central to the performative power of the vegan witness. Vegan testimonies – such as the work of activist content creators – are affective and sensory encounters that endeavour to create potential co-witnesses by inviting and mobilising the moral engagement of others.

1.3 Chapter summaries

Chapter Two: The Research Context reviews and evaluates the literature that shaped the questions for the research project, contextualising the methodological decision to choose the philosophical belief of veganism as a case study. It presents some of the challenges of studying non-religious individuals – for example, how to research a social category rather than a group (Trzebiatowska 2018: 3) – and the definitional concerns of how research participants understand the concepts of religion or belief. This calls for reflexivity on the part of researchers and underlines the importance of investigating how such terms are understood and interpreted by research participants. The chapter then moves to a discussion of mediatisation theory, which was employed in the pilot research for this research project and started the work of investigating performative vegan belief among vegan YouTubers (Harding and Day 2021). While mediatisation theory is not developed in the thesis hereafter, with subsequent discussions being underpinned by media witnessing theory, engaging with this literature helped to locate a gap between non-religion scholarship and digital religion scholarship. While *Witnesses to the Future* does not claim that ethical veganism is a non-religious belief per se, it addresses the as-yet underdeveloped intersections of investigating non-

religion and media. The chapter ends with reviewing sociological literature concerning veganism and animal rights, which sets the scene for presenting to sociologists of religion a case study of veganism within the context of the religion or belief section of the Equality Act 2010.

Chapter Three: The Research Journey describes how I refined my initial PhD proposal from a study of ethical-living practices on social media to the more substantive case study of ethical veganism. The research design was refined by the legal ruling *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* (2020), in which an employment tribunal concluded that ethical vegans are entitled to similar legal protections in British workplaces as those who hold religious beliefs. The pilot fieldwork is discussed in this chapter, including how this stage of research generated topics to explore in later fieldwork, such as the transmission of philosophical belief, and how this belief is mediatised. In explaining the context for choosing digital ethnography as research method, I assess a range of approaches to digital ethnography and show how these informed fieldwork. Finally, the ethical and relational concerns of the research project are discussed, including a reflexive account of my positioning as an ambivalently non-religious, non-vegan researcher and how this influenced the collection and analysis of data.

Chapter Four: The Witness introduces an overview of witnessing theory to establish the figure of the vegan witness, which runs through the subsequent empirical chapters. The testimony that vegans produce has an ethical and political value, demanding that the oppression of animals is not only seen, but also acted upon. This overview of witnessing theory is complemented by two scenes from fieldwork that establish my framing of vegan belief as a mode of bearing witness. In a reflexive account of my actions in fieldwork and into the post-field period, I acknowledge that while I saw the atrocities that informants alerted me to, I failed to take action upon what I saw. Although I saw, I did not bear witness. This realisation resulted in choosing witnessing theory to frame my data analysis. Witnessing theory, particularly Kelly Oliver's conception of ethical obligation being at the core of subjectivity (Oliver 2001: 15-16), is presented in this chapter to underpin my understanding of ethical

veganism as a performative, affective and relational belief. As part of this philosophical belief, vegans carry a responsibility towards alterity, transforming their recognition of the non-human animal other into ethical obligation.

Having established the methodological and theoretical foundations of the thesis, the next five chapters present data that examine how vegans' beliefs are formed and how they communicate these beliefs as a performative and affective mode of testimony. This testimony, through its transmission to others, seeks to create new co-witnesses. In **Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness**, I present interview participants' accounts of becoming vegan, which I call witnessing narratives. These individuals convey their experiences by employing metaphors that suggest connection, which binds them to the lives and worlds of non-human animals. This sense of connectivity underlines the relationality between human and non-human animals. I also show how becoming vegan can be experienced as a form of awakening, in which vegans use retrospective narratives to make sense of their past experiences and draw a line between their past lives and their current ethical convictions. In some cases, interlocutors describe the oppression of animals as a vegan truth that they have 'woken up' to. The performative aspects of how this truth is produced and performed is developed in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: Veganism as a Performative Act of Bearing Witness proposes that vegans performatively transmit their philosophical beliefs in relation to the non-vegan other. In bearing witness to the suffering of animals, vegans often face hostility towards their beliefs. Subsequently, vegans' testimonial labour may seek to moralise the future actions of potential co-witnesses. As an example, I present data from interviews with vegans who have taken a pledge to not eat at any table where animals are being consumed. This refusal is a form of embodied testimonial labour that uses one's body as a site of liberation for non-human animals. The chapter also examines how vegans performatively communicate a vegan truth, with some individuals insisting that the oppression of animals is not something that must be believed in but is, rather, a directly observable fact. The

chapter ends with showing how vegan testimony circulates online. In this sometimes hostile and vitriolic space, non-vegans are tasked with receiving, responding to and acting upon the ethical message of vegan testimony. Facing a potentially hostile reception to this message, the testimonial actions of vegans perform a vegan truth.

Chapter Seven: Veganism as a Practice of Affective Witnessing draws from diverse strands of affect theory to argue that vegans' testimony is not only performative, but also that affect is central to the performative power of the vegan witness. Bearing witness as a vegan is a dynamic, relational process in which the circulation of affect plays a significant role. Affect is understood as a non-linguistic force of encounter than breaks the boundaries between bodies (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 3). As an example, the becoming-vegan story of an interview participant called Lisa is employed to illustrate the human/non-human interactions that operate beyond language. I also show how vegan witnessing communities are bound by affect's social energy, employing Sara Ahmed's (2004b: 4) concept of 'sticky' affect to present the vegan bubble – an online space in which vegans reflect and reinforce each other's beliefs – as a sticky affective object. While stickiness is relational, I suggest that vegan testimony can also affectively communicate disconnection and disjuncture, which challenges individuals to question what they have previously believed regarding the use and consumption of animals.

Chapter Eight: Vegan Testimony and the Digital Sensory Encounter expands the argument that affect is central to vegan witnessing by introducing the digital sensory encounter, a mode of vegan testimony rendered powerful by the way in which it employs the fabrics (Kuntsman 2012: 1) of digital culture. These affective fabrics – such as comments, hashtags and emoji – create digital sensory encounters that create an intensity of feeling that has the potential to move the receiver of the testimony to act against the oppression of animals. Employing examples from fieldwork, I show how these affective fabrics bring vegan networked publics, and veganism as a philosophical belief, into being. The chapter also includes a reflexive account of my experiences during fieldwork. My

responses to the vegan testimony that I encountered in fieldwork informed my analysis of vegan belief as relational and affective. In experiencing the affective intensity of online vegan testimony through the digital sensory encounter, I develop the argument that affective, sensory experience is integral to how vegan belief is acquired and transmitted.

In **Chapter Nine: Vegans as Witnesses to the Future**, I propose that vegans, in bearing witness, performatively and affectively communicate their transformation to a future self – and a future vegan world – to others. Vegan testimony is oriented towards the future in its promise of transformation, which communicates the potential of remaking the self and remaking the world. In their affective relationship to the future, vegans experience the co-existence of hope with despair. Their affective relationship to the future carries a hopefulness that a vegan future will liberate animals from oppression. However, in witnessing the violence of how animals are oppressed, vegans also imagine the future with despondency. Vegans may experience a sense of futurelessness (Tutton 2023: 439-443), in which their hopes for enacting a vegan future are foreclosed and prevented from becoming a possibility. Vegan testimony, which is political and action-oriented, calls on others to not merely recognise, but also take action upon, human dominance and the existential uncertainty of living in the Anthropocene. For the vegans in this study, existential uncertainty is felt affectively. Vegans also reject anthropocentrism, drawing the attention of other humans to the future potential of human and non-human entanglements. For some vegans, this entails an unlearning of human superiority and an orientation towards a future in which non-human animals are liberated.

Finally, **Chapter Ten: Conclusion** restates the central research questions and groups the findings into four main arguments. In summary, these arguments are that veganism is a performative, action-oriented philosophical belief; affect is intrinsic to the performative power of this belief; social media co-constructs this belief; and vegan belief is oriented towards a transformative, if uncertain, future. I also summarise the main contributions of the research, which provides a nuanced understanding of veganism as a philosophical belief under the Equality Act 2010 while also contributing to research

that investigates a small facet of what it may mean to be non-religious. I also show how my work may facilitate further scholarship to explore the affective and embodied aspects of philosophical belief, including its mediatised forms.

2 The Research Context

2.1 The complexity of non-religion

Witnesses to the Future employs social media content production and consumption as a site for thinking sociologically about the ways in which veganism, as a philosophical belief, can be shaped by one's media practices. In doing so, it traces the ways in which vegans position themselves in relation to religion and non-religion. In this chapter, I set out the scholarly context that shaped my research design, starting with an assessment of the non-religion category. I consider the methodological dilemma of researching non-religion through the lens of religion, as well as the potential difficulties of capturing non-religion through survey methods. These discussions illustrate a methodological decision I took in the research design to investigate philosophical belief – an area hitherto largely neglected in sociology of religion literature. Specifically, I use the case study of ethical veganism, which in 2020 became a protected characteristic under the religion or belief section of the Equality Act 2010. I also identify a gap in digital religion literature and suggest that this body of scholarship has neglected non-religion, which I propose to address through investigating how, and to what extent, veganism as a philosophical belief is formed through media practices. The chapter concludes by presenting a brief survey of literature concerning veganism. This situates my research as contributing a deeper understanding of veganism as a philosophical belief to sociologists of religion and non-religion.

British Social Attitudes has reported that responses to the non-religion question have risen by two-thirds over a period of 30 years, in what Woodhead (2016a: 245) calls a 'slow, unplanned and almost unnoticed revolution'. Woodhead (2016b: 42) also notes that the proportion of individuals identifying as having no religion is set to equal, or even overtake, that of Christians within a few decades, a prospect she describes as 'epoch-making'. By 2019, British Social Attitudes reported that most of Britain had shifted towards non-affiliation, with 52 per cent of respondents reporting that they did not belong to any religion. The survey also reported that the number of people in Britain with no religion that had not been raised in a religion increased from 11 per cent in 1998 to 23 per cent in 2018.

Specific to England and Wales, the 2011 Census reported that 25 per cent of respondents selected the 'no religion' option, a rise of 10 per cent from the previous Census a decade before, making the non-religious a quarter of the population of England and Wales and the second-largest 'faith' group after Christianity (Mumford 2015: 10). As the fieldwork for my thesis commenced, the 2021 Census took place. When the results were published (Office for National Statistics 2021), they showed that for the first time in England and Wales, less than half of the population (46.2 per cent) who reported their religion described themselves as Christian. 'No religion' was the second most-common response, increasing by 12 percentage points to 37.2 per cent, up from 25.2 per cent in 2011.

Glenn Vernon's paper Religious Nones: A Neglected Category in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1969) was the first in a series of studies on individuals that claimed they did not have a religious affiliation (Bullivant and Lee 2012: 21). Vernon contended that the religious 'nones' had been ignored by those who studied religion scientifically and proposed that 'none' was a phenomenon worthy of study. In the same year, the Vatican convened a social science conference – a landmark event and probably the first of its kind (Bullivant and Lee 2012: 21) – on the 'culture of unbelief'. In the report of the event that followed, Caporale and Grumelli (1971: 2) acknowledged the neglect of the 'nones', arguing that 'unbelief does not constitute merely a residual category of human behaviour; the negative term may well point to a dramatic transformation in the groundwork of human religiosity'. Since the 1960s, the absence of religion had been largely explained within the framework of secularisation theories and did not receive much scholarly attention, despite Colin Campbell's call for sociological analysis in his 1971 book *Towards a Sociology of Irreligion*. As Cotter (2011: 2) notes, it has become something of a tradition in the emerging field of non-religion to acknowledge that Campbell's call for a sociological analysis of non-religion had been widely ignored (see also Bullivant and Lee 2012; Zuckerman et al 2016: 7). Zuckerman (2010: vii-ix) argues that while a significant amount of scholarship has been devoted to secularisation – generally theoretical and typological – it is remarkable that sociologists and anthropologists have neglected secular life as it is lived, expressed and experienced, especially considering that irreligious and non-religious individuals have always existed. One reason for this neglect is the dominance of secularisation discourse in the

academy. Until the recent growth of scholarship on non-religion, the absence of religion had been studied in the context of the decline of organised Christianity, with its religion-centric approach seldom challenged; thus, academic interest in people without religious adherence was sluggish (Brown 2011: 37-41). Cannell (2010: 87) notes that secularisation theorists often suggested that secularisation was both a sign of, and a consequence of, inevitable modernity. Within the social sciences, the secularisation thesis predicting the eventual demise of religious belief and practices, with religion eventually losing its social significance (Wilson 1966; Berger 1967; Bruce 2002), is what Mumford (2015: 162) notes as a 'largely unquestioned' paradigm for a long time. Secularisation theory regards religion as a 'singular phenomenon with no complete equivalent in the secular world', the consequence being that research methodologies that investigate secularity are focused on religion (Lee 2014: 468). Elsewhere, Lee (2015b) has argued that this theoretical legacy has resulted in secularity being regarded as insubstantial, tending to focus on how individuals are moving away from religion, rather than what they are moving towards. While Glenn Vernon and Colin Campbell prepared the ground for more sustained enquiry into the non-religious, it was not until the twenty-first century that more studies of non-religion gained prominence. A growing number of social scientists turned their attention from secular phenomena, as a subsidiary category of the study of religion, to non-religious phenomena, investigated as a subject in its own right (Bullivant and Lee 2012: 19).

Lois Lee's *Recognising the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular* (2015b) is arguably a touchstone for current enquiry into the growing non-religious population. One of its central research questions is concerned with whether non-religious people are identifiable by their lack of engagement with religion, as anticipated by secularisation theorists, or whether they are 'substantially and meaningfully' irreligious or non-religious rather than post-religious or secular (Lee 2015b: 3-4). The book presents research that explores how people live their lives in relation to religion, using semi-structured interviews dealing with key themes of religious and non-religious identities and beliefs (Lee 2015b: 10). One notable result of Lee's research is that it has helped to develop scholarly enquiry into the non-religious beyond the narrower category of atheism. Sumerau and Cragun (2016:

390) note that studies of the non-religious have been generally limited to the experiences of atheists, thus leaving a significant portion of other non-religious identities unexplored. Trzebiatowska (2018: 3) argues that the gap has been addressed to some extent but that it nevertheless remains a challenge to research a social category rather than a group. One reason for this challenge is because those who report having no religion are a heterogeneous group, describing themselves with a range of labels – such as atheist, agnostic or humanist – and likely to 'vary considerably in their religiosity' (Madge and Hemming 2017: 872). As such, there is a diversity of non-religion that is yet to be explored in its own right (Quack 2014: 439). However, current scholarship about the non-religious is creating an intriguing picture of what constitutes non-religion, in all its diversity. Noting Talal Asad's observation that '[a]ny discipline that seeks to understand 'religion' must also try to understand its other' (2003: 22), Quack (2014: 443) argues that studies of non-religion can complement studies of secularity, secularisation or secularism, while also demarcating themselves from a 'problematic genealogy', stretching back to the nineteenth century, of secularisation theory and its 'outdated evolutionistic and modernistic ideas'. In the next section, I turn to assessing critiques of the non-religion category and consider the methodologies employed to investigate non-religious phenomena. I also suggest that reflexivity is important to account for research participants' understandings of non-religion and how these may differ from labels that may be imposed upon them by researchers.

2.2 Critiques of non-religion and alternative frameworks

In this section, I consider some of the critiques of the non-religion category and its perceived limitations. After an assessment of some alternative conceptual frameworks, I then present debates concerning how to study non-religious youth. This reflects an earlier iteration of the research project before I had chosen the philosophical belief of veganism as a case study. At this point, I had considered drawing from a sample of non-religious young adults – a group whose lives and relationships with others have been indelibly shaped by the ubiquity of digital technologies – to understand if expressions of their non-religious identities could be discerned through their media practices. In employing this sample, I had intended to investigate the relationship between young adults' digital selfhoods and their non-religious affiliations. This was in response to an early research

question, 'what do non-religious people do online?', which is discussed in *3.1 Beginning the research*. At a later stage in the research design, I chose veganism as a case study and sought to recruit individuals based on their philosophical belief rather than a particular age cohort. Thus, I include in this section a short review of the literature that led to the decision not to sample according to generational cohorts, since this did not align with the central aim of my research: to understand how veganism as a philosophical belief is acquired, formed and transmitted. Sampling is discussed in more detail in the section *3.3: Main fieldwork period*.

Long before the current wave of research on non-religion and unbelief, the difficulties of definition had been noted by Charles Glock who, in *The Culture of Unbelief*, argued (1971: 54) that in beginning to study a phenomenon, it must be conceptualised so that it can 'subjected to sustained inquiry'. He contended that the study of unbelief had not been conceptualised, partly because of the difficulties of establishing the boundaries for inquiry of the phenomenon. However, Lee (2015b: 32) establishes some boundaries by proposing a distinction between secular and non-religion, whereby secular refers to phenomena where religion is a secondary concern and non-religion is defined thus:

> '[Non-religion] is used to indicate not the absence of something (religion) but the presence of something (else), characterised, at least in the first place, by its relation to religion but nevertheless distinct from it. Non-religion is therefore any phenomenon – position, perspective or practice – that is primarily understood in relation to religion, but which is not in itself considered to be religious. Alternatively expressed, non-religion is a phenomenon understood in contradistinction to religion.'

This distinction facilitates the investigation of non-religious phenomena. Johannes Quack concurs with non-religion as a 'master concept', arguing that the disadvantage of the term secularity is that it is associated with previous studies of the secular and of secularisation. Quack contends (2014: 439)

that non-religion should 'not be used to denote everything that is not religious' and that the term can display positive characteristics, such as secular morality through to humanism and human rights, or alternative worldviews based on science and naturalism. He concludes that the diversity of non-religion should be studied in its own right, employing empirical research that is grounded in religious/non-religious entanglements. This acknowledgement of the religious/non-religious binary is also echoed by Salonen (2018:13) who, in setting in the scene for the study of lived non-religion, urges caution against entrenching the division between religion and non-religion, rather than exploring the reimagining – even the dissolving – of these fixed boundaries. It has been argued that the study of religion, and thus of non-religion, takes place in a Western, Christianised context, assuming a positive of normative religiosity and thus reifying the 'academically constructed dichotomy' between religion and non-religion (Cotter 2011: 3). Beaman (2014: 91), with reference to Woodhead (2014:3), contends that the idea of 'religious traditions' is defended by religious and political elites who have interests in preserving the differences between them.

Hemming (2017: 115) highlights a limitation of Lee's definition, namely the 'conspicuous lack of knowledge' about the nature of non-religion 'in any given context', noting that it remains difficult to provide a definitive account of what non-religion is and thus provide a clear focus for empirical enquiry. Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic (2015: 5) acknowledge that term non-religion has 'gained epistemological ground' but express uncertainty about how the concept can act as an umbrella term and that associated concepts such as irreligion and unbelief may not easily fit within one category. Cheruvallil-Contractor et al (2016: 173-177) note that employing the term non-religion raises the methodological dilemma of 'investigating one phenomenon through the lens of another' and that the difficulty of adopting Lee's definition of non-religion is that it is intimately linked with the question of how 'religion' is defined, which they argue is not straightforward. The authors add that the non-religion category encompasses a 'wide range of understandings' among researchers and research participants. More robust criticism comes from Jong (2015: 15), who takes issue with the terminology of non-religion and criticises 'sheepish attempts' to define terms, 'followed by apologies for the inevitable inadequacy of the proposed definitions'. Arguing that there is no such thing as religion, but

rather distinct phenomena – such as participation in rituals or obedience to moral codes – that co-occur in packages labelled as particular religions, he suggests that scholars of religion and non-religion should abandon such terminology and the 'definitional handwringing' it brings. Engelke (2015: 135-142) has also expressed doubts about 'conceptual bugbears' that anthropologists of religion grapple with – namely terms such as atheism, godlessness and non-religion. He critiques such terms as troublesome at best, lacking analytic purchase at worst, contending that they risk pulling scholars 'back to what they are trying to get away from: God, gods, and religion'. Non-religion, he suggests, is always 'beholden to something else'. He adds that in the context of the anthropology of religion and its processes of self-critique, the study of non-religion allows the 'non' a 'free pass' that focuses on the negation and not the object that is being negated, despite not accepting the object in the first place.

In response to criticism about the category of non-religion, Lee (2015b: 194) acknowledges it may be 'a limited category' and, like all categories, 'arbitrary […] historical and contingent'. Although she concedes that non-religion may be a placeholder term, the concept can still generate empirical and theoretical work. Elsewhere, Lee (2012a: 134) argues that scholars have not yet developed the conceptual and methodological tools to consolidate the growing body of knowledge about non-religion. It is not a perfect term, she adds, it is pragmatic and relative to religion 'because religion has dominated relevant areas of thought for some centuries and continues to do so at the point at which non-religious scholars enter the debate'. In accepting religion as a root term, she notes that religion is a concept that has dominated Western thinking for centuries, yet also has some intrinsic value, benefiting from the term religion's 'many achievements', such as its pliability with approaches such as 'lived religion' or 'material religion' (Lee 2015b: 25-26). In a research context that has been influenced by Christianity, Salonen (2018: 13) suggests that it could be useful to accept that the term non-religion can hold an 'explanatory power' and that the concept of lived non-religion 'can blur the boundary between religion and non-religion and help to acknowledge the fuzziness, in-betweenness and indecision regarding these terms'. Quack (2014: 445, 456) suggests that the contrast between the terms religion and non-religion is best described as 'a contrary, not as a contradictory opposition',

arguing against essentialised distinctions between what is religious or non-religious and that such relationships can be stronger or weaker, and may change over time. Although the division between sacred and secular has been part of academic discourse since Durkheim (1912), intellectually creating in-between spaces can help scholars to 'better understand the limitations of the binary and to question its utility' (Day, Vincett and Cotter 2016: 2).

Scholars have suggested alternative terms and conceptual frameworks to non-religion. These include unbelief, worldviews and meaning systems. The Understanding Unbelief study (2019) follows the interpretation provided in *The Oxford Dictionary of Atheism* (Bullivant and Lee 2016): 'The state of lacking (especially religious) faith or belief […] unbelief is often used in a wide sense, implying a generalised lack of belief in a God or gods.' Conrad (2018: 1), in arguing for use of the term unbelief, contends that the term provides conceptual flexibility 'without mischaracterising the person or group into a predefined religious position'. He adds that the study of unbelief, 'the incremental, partial ruptures with traditional religion or traditional spiritual practices', can be documented by scholars without the partisanism of a label such as atheist. However, it is difficult to see the 'conceptual flexibility' in unbelief when the term is still beholden to belief. Being termed an unbeliever still forces a research participant into a position that is related to belief, when the notion of belief may not mean anything to them. Similarly, a non-religious research participant may be uncomfortable, or unwilling, to use a term in their self-identification that is related to religion. In tracing the genealogy of belief, Day (2011: 7) asks why belief has been rarely problematised by most anthropologists and sociologists of religion, many of whom have accepted the Weberian (1922: 117) paradigm that people have throughout time searched for meaning. This highlights the need to think reflexively about belief – including unbelief – and how it might be understood by research participants. Many of the participants in Wallis' (2014: 82) qualitative study of 14- and 15-year-olds in England, who identified as having no religion, understood religion as being primarily concerned with propositional belief, whether metaphysical, existential or ethical. Wallis argues that the academic study of youth and religion constructs young people as a group who, in need of a core set of beliefs, are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives. For this reason, he left discussion about notions of religion and

no religion until the end of his interviews so as not to repeat 'the assumption that there is a necessary relation between young people and the search for meaningful belief'.

Qualitative studies in Britain and North America have found respondents struggling to articulate beliefs that have a high degree of salience for their lives, which may indicate a limited utility of the concept of propositional belief for studying contemporary religiosity (Day and Lynch 2013: 200). They note, drawing on Day (2011), the emerging turn to think critically about belief, acknowledging anthropological critiques challenging the notion that 'propositional belief is a common element of human culture' and suggesting that this is the product of a Western Christian imaginary. Furthermore, belief-centred questions may hold limited usefulness when analysing the non-religious. Stacey (2020: 1-2), in questioning Day's (2011) approach, suggests that asking people what they believe 'may force them into a response that forecloses the complexity of their imagination' and 'places conceptual constraints on explorations of non-religious imaginaries'. While he acknowledges that Day's question 'what do you believe?' is effective in understanding nominal Christianity, he argues that it is less useful for understanding non-religious individuals and suggests that in asking about belief, non-religious participants in research may be prompted to think about religion in their response. Cotter (2011: 8-9), in reference to Day (2009: 90), engages with non-religion 'as it is lived, experienced and expressed and seeks to avoid imposing the researcher's preconceived category onto informants […] How an individual claims to understand 'non-religion' will depend upon their understanding of 'religion''. Cheruvallil-Contractor et al (2016: 182) acknowledge the 'considerable risks' in researching non-religion through the frame of religion and sound a note of caution that 'non-religious practices are squeezed into religious shapes that do not entirely apply'. While Stacey is correct to draw attention to the potential conceptual constraints of asking non-religious individuals about their beliefs, it is important to note that in Britain, the Equality Act 2010 has ensured that beliefs – including non-religious beliefs – are more strongly recognised in equalities law, alongside other aspects of identity such as gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity. Thus, for some non-religious individuals, belief may not necessarily be construed with religious belief, but rather accepted as a legal construct. As will be explored later in the thesis, in *6.2 Dimensions of vegan belief*, interview

participants in *Witnesses to the Future* were not asked 'what do you believe?', following Day (2011), but were asked whether, in light of ethical veganism becoming a belief protected by law under the Equality Act 2010, whether they considered veganism to be a belief.

Rock (2017) advocates for a worldview/meaning systems approach that 'distinctively interfaces' religion and non-religion, citing Taves' endorsement of a worldviews approach as the preferred methodology to supersede religious studies. Taves expresses concern with the concept of religion as pushing an 'already troubled relationship with our key terms to breaking point' (2018: 1). She suggests adapting a meaning systems approach, which is already in use in the discipline of psychology and enables scholars to conceptualise their objects of study in more generic terms that encompass both religious and non-religious meaning systems. A shift from religions to worldviews would, Taves argues, provide an overarching framework in which religion and non-religion can sit. Taves, Asprem and Ihm (2018) outline the approach of anthropologist André Droogers to worldview studies, which makes three contributions to scholars. The study of non-religious worldviews enables researchers to study a large range of worldviews without the concern of whether they are religious or not; researchers can better focus on attempts to address 'ultimate questions'; and worldview dynamics can be explored as 'an interactive process embedded in social relations'. Droogers and Van Harskamp (2014: 2) approach religion as a sub-category of the term worldview, 'as part of a larger field in which people struggle with and for meaning', whereby closer attention is paid to the similarities between religious and secular views, rather than perceiving a binary opposition between them. This approach is also echoed by Taves, Asprem and Ihm (2018: 207), who define a worldviews methodology in terms of how to ask 'big questions'. These questions could be ones such as 'what exists?' or 'how should we live?'. However, such questions assume that individuals are engaged in a search for meaning in their lives. In assuming a prominent role for such big questions, the worldviews approach risks assuming that questions of existential meaning are of central importance to research participants.

Aside from the worldviews framework, 'meaning systems' and 'existential cultures' have been suggested as analytical frameworks with which to investigate non-religious individuals. Dobbelaere (2014: 224), in arguing that scholars should study meaning systems other than religious ones, suggests that researchers can ask whether individuals are searching for meaning in their lives and what their sources of meaning are. Lee (2015b: 159-60) has highlighted the utility of thinking in terms of 'existential cultures', which 'incarnate ideas about the origins of life and human consciousness and about how both are transformed or expire after death'. These existential beliefs are bound with 'notions of meaning and purpose in life'. Thériault (2019: 2-3) notes that Lee works with Weber's fundamental concern of 'meaning-giving ideas and their practical dimensions' and relates it to her own research, in which she asks her participants, a sample of non-religious Germans, what they would write if they had a tattoo made. As tattoos are indelible, the process of choosing one involves much reflection; thus, Thériault employs tattoos as 'meaningful objects' to help illustrate 'what a Weberian-informed sociology of a non-religious world might look like'. While such paradigms may have some utility in drawing scholars away from the religion/non-religion binary, they tend to assume that research participants are engaged in a search for meaning; that they are preoccupied with the origins of life; or with what happens to human beings after death. Perhaps these paradigms reflect the preoccupations of scholars, rather than the individuals and groups they do research with, whose existential beliefs may play a far more minor role in their day-to-day lives.

While quantitative methods for measuring religious and non-religious affiliation can be helpful, they can also be limited in capturing the complexities of survey category. To take an example, Davie's (1994) 'believing without belonging' thesis suggested that the British still maintained a private belief in God even without attendance at church. This was countered by Voas and Crockett (2005), who argued that religion in modern Europe is in decline and that belief has eroded in Britain at the same rate of religious affiliation and attendance. However, as Day notes (2011: 6), sociologists of religion – Davie and Voas included – have based their arguments on quantitative data using questions employing religious vocabulary that reflect belief in its propositional forms, such as asking 'do you believe in God?'. Most large surveys measure beliefs without probing what 'belief' means, meaning

that the survey rests on the stability of the term and assumes that it means the same thing to all survey respondents (Day and Coleman 2010:5; Day 2016b). Challenging this assumption matters. How people self-identify on surveys and censuses, in what can be termed 'tick-box talk', produces knowledge in which statistics can not only shape decisions and discourses about society but can also be used to further interests and claims (Day and Lee 2014: 345). An example of this can be seen in Day's work in identifying methodological gaps in the sociology of religion, such as quantitative studies asking 'overtly religious questions using religious vocabularies'. To address this, she prompts discussion using non-religious vocabulary (Day 2011: 32, 36). Moreover, generic non-religious categories can appear as negative, which results in respondents recording a form of cultural identification that 'lacks meaning or relevance to them or is perhaps entirely absent in their lives' (Lee 2014: 466). Lee cites Pasquale's (2007) description of the 'none' category as 'a function of survey method rather than a self-description'. One of the implications of her research – fieldwork conducted in the UK with individuals that identify as non-religious – is that 'non-religious identification cannot be used as a direct measure of secularity' and that affiliation data do not differentiate between positive non-religious identities and minimal or negative identities (Lee 2014: 476). Lee (2015a: 26) also acknowledges that 'non-religious' and related categories in social scientific surveys and population censuses are not only imposed but also appropriated and mobilised for specific ends. She adds that respondents also use generic non-religious categories to reject category labels or to identify as 'indifferent to religion'. Census categories can also act as both an objectifying technique and a method by which individuals can identify themselves in relation to others within a social space (Ruppert 2012: 38-39).

Salonen (2018: 13) suggests that it could be useful to accept that the term non-religion can hold an 'explanatory power', since the term appears 'to serve as a point of reference on which many people can base their self-proclaimed identity'. Woodhead argues (2016b: 43) that her surveys point to what she calls a 'blurring of boundaries' in self-identification as non-religious. She contends that while more and more British people are non-religious, it does not mean that they are secular, adding that non-religion 'is not really an identity category at all, it's an artefact of pre-existing, modern survey

categories – a pollster's clumsy recognition that the standard categories of Christian, Muslim, Buddhist have ceased to be relevant to an increasing number of people'. In his study of non-religion in Scotland, Cotter (2016a: 200) notes participants' 'fluidity' in the way they identify with religion-related terms. He argues that their identifications were 'tactical and contextual discursive acts rather than permanent states of being' and that some participants expressed a 'profound discomfort with labels in general'. This discomfort with religion-related labels among participants is something that appears to be little-discussed in many sociological accounts of non-religion. Thus, it is essential that researchers practise reflexivity to account for how research participants interpret the labels that are imposed on them during the research process. Terms such 'unbeliever' or 'not religious' may be interpreted in differing ways by research participants and may not always adequately account for the ambivalence that participants may feel concerning religious and non-religious labels. As Bullock and Bullivant note (2021), non-religious identity and affiliation includes both positive and negative aspects of upbringing and belief, as well as past and current practice. Wallis (2014: 71) engages in the debate about the study of religion's approach to statistics in the context of a research project with young people who tick the 'no religion' box in surveys. He suggests that a weakness of quantitative data is that research questions may be too well-framed, thus making it difficult to analyse layers of meaning that arise from answers. For example, he notes that when census and survey respondents are asked whether they have a religion, their response will be based on what they understand religion to be. His research, conducted with teenagers in two English secondary schools, interrogated the reasons why participants would tick the 'no religion' box. Wallis found that these respondents tended to assume that to identify as a religious person, they had to accept all beliefs of a faith. Hence, the young people in the study, although believing in some parts of a religion, or believing in God and praying occasionally, would still tick 'no religion'. Wallis notes that a survey respondent's understanding of religion cannot be 'retrospectively determined from the respondent's answer'. Wallis' observations highlight some of the limitations of relying on quantitative data to understand non-religious individuals and emphasise the need for researchers to reflect on the terms they use and how they are interpreted by the individuals they conduct research with.

In critiquing non-religion as a negative label that is not fit for purpose, Cheruvallil-Contractor et al (2021: 329) call for a new vocabulary to 'articulate, describe and understand non-religious identities and experiences'. However, as my review of literature has indicated, sociologists of religion do not lack the vocabulary and conceptual tools required to understand non-religion. An important area for research, which my study goes some way to address, is in employing philosophical belief to, in part, understand the shared experience between the categories of religion and non-religion. This approach heeds Beaman's (2017: 26) suggestion to consider uncertainty as 'a creative space for thinking about what is happening in the world we observe'. She suggests that in hastily trying to 'fill the gap between religion and non-religion', scholars may risk losing an opportunity for imaginative reflection, what she describes as 'the social equivalent of dark matter in astronomy'. Through investigating veganism as a philosophical belief, *Witnesses to the Future* acknowledges the overlaps between religion and non-religion, granting research participants agency to reflect on the multifaceted aspects of their beliefs and identities.

The research context for this thesis, which I have outlined in this chapter, attends to two main strands of thinking. Firstly, it employs non-religion as a placeholder category that facilitates empirical work (Lee 2015b: 194). In choosing philosophical belief as an object of study, I acknowledge non-religion as complex, dynamic and shifting, but I do not make the claim that veganism is intrinsically a non-religious belief. Rather, ethical veganism is approached as a protected characteristic that falls under the religion or belief section of the Equality Act 2010. Secondly, in acknowledging the complexity of the non-religion category, my research investigates the ambiguity of survey category and the ambivalence of research participants in responding to the categories that are imposed upon them. Thus, I approach non-religion as a potentially unmarked (Brekhus 1998, Scott 2018) social category. Brekhus (1998) suggests that American sociology devotes great epistemological attention to the unmarked, 'ontologically uncommon' features of social life, with the 'marked' receiving disproportionate attention. In arguing for a sociology of the unmarked that foregrounds the 'unnoticed and taken-for-granted' elements of social reality, Brekhus contends that naming a category 'simultaneously constructs and foregrounds that category', using examples such as 'Chinese

American' or 'Welfare Mother' to show how a category can be distinguished from its more typical, normative form. In this framing, the non-religion category can be considered as a phenomenon that is immediately marked – by the non- prefix – as a deviation from religion. Building on Brekhus' work, Scott (2018: 3) considers 'nothing' as a 'sociologically neglected terrain' that includes 'negatively defined phenomena' such as non-identification, non-participation and non-presence. Scott suggests studying how social actors performatively 'do nothing' to explore 'the spaces this creates in social life'. In the context of my research, non-religion is treated as a non-social form, following what Scott describes as significant social objects that are 'constructed as meaningful by the reflexive social actors who manage them'. *Witnesses to the Future* thus takes a discursive approach, conducted through ethnography, to investigate how individuals – specifically ethical vegans – feel about how censuses and surveys shape and measure their identifications. Additionally, the thesis investigates the actions that they take as ethical vegans – such as their social interactions and their embodied acts of care for non-human animals – in positioning themselves in relation to other humans and other animals.

If the category of religion has become more ambivalent, as Taira (2010) suggests with reference to the classification of Finnish Wicca practices, then it may be appropriate to approach religion – and non-religion – as a discursive technique. In his study of the Universal Life Church (ULC) in the US, where non-religious people choose religious ministers for their wedding ceremonies and ULC ministers regard themselves as non-religious, Hoesly (2015: 9) argues that religious, spiritual and non-religious identities are not stable formations but should rather be approached as 'discursive, relational constructions contingently articulated in particular locations at specific times for particular purposes'. Hutchings (2019: 1) draws on Hoesly's work to propose that in online spaces, it is harder to trace the boundary between religion and non-religion, arguing that if attention is only paid to 'explicit forms of anti-religion', researchers may miss the more subtle forms of what it means to be non-religious, 'including whole areas of activity in which the boundary doesn't seem to mean very much at all'. Hutchings advises that researchers of non-religion should develop methodologies that are sensitive to the 'transient contexts' and implications of its performances. These are important

points that have helped to shape the methodology used for *Witnesses to the Future*. While a case study concerning philosophical belief has been employed to explore a small aspect of what it may mean to be non-religious, this study's methodology also seeks to capture the subtleties of how individuals position themselves in relation to religious and non-religious categories. Additionally, employing digital ethnographic methods to investigate ethical veganism as a media practice attends to Cotter's (2016b: 98) suggestion to investigate alternative organising principles that are independent of religious categories. Cotter follows Quack (2014: 441) in that non-religion is approached more as a descriptive term rather than as a term that draws sharp boundaries between religion and non-religion.

2.3 Youth and non-religion

This section discusses youth and non-religion. I have chosen to include this because an earlier iteration of the research design for *Witnesses to the Future* was concerned with tracing the relationship between young adults' digital selfhoods and their non-religious affiliations. Although I later chose to recruit individuals on the basis of their philosophical belief rather than their age, the following discussion is important in that it shows how the trend towards less propositional belief and more performative relationality spearheaded by Generation Z (Percy 2019: 169) is relevant to this study's investigation of philosophical belief.

Despite the growth of research concerning non-religious individuals, there remains a lack of research into the lives of non-religious youth. Hemming and Madge (2017: 197) draw attention to the dearth of research into non-religious youth, despite the 'substantial' body of research concerning youth and religion. Some exceptions include small-scale studies with non-religious youth (Cotter 2011 and 2016a; Day 2011 and 2013a; Catto and Eccles 2013; Wallis 2014; Strhan and Shillitoe 2019), but it is evident that more research needs to be conducted, particularly concerning the fluidity in how younger people construct aspects of their non-religious identity. The Youth on Religion study, a large-scale project funded by the British AHRC/ESRC Religion & Society programme, explored the

meaning of religion in the lives of young people in London and Bradford (Madge et al 2012). Data were drawn from an online survey with more than 10,000 11- to 17-year-olds, complemented with face-to-face discussion groups and interviews. The findings suggested that the young people who gave themselves a non-religious label were a 'very diverse' group and expressed a 'fluidity in religious practices that depended on where [participants] were and who they were with' (Madge and Hemming 2017: 885-886). However, a study such as Youth on Religion still operates within a wider framework of research about 'religion', a topic that may have little, if any, relevance to non-religious individuals that have not been socialised into a religion at home, who are indifferent to religion – or indeed indifferent to the term non-religion. This underscores the dilemma of researching the non-religious through the lens of religion, as already discussed in this chapter.

Moreover, caution should be exercised in making generalisations about generations and treating generational groups as homogeneous (Collins-Mayo and Dandelion 2010: 2; Day 2013b). This is as much the case for Generation Z – born roughly between 1995 and 2015, although there is no agreed-upon definition – as it was for the preceding alphabetical generations of X and Y. Questions have been raised concerning how much analytical purchase there is in framing research around an age cohort, as well as critically interrogating why such cohorts are created and operationalised. Lynch (2010: 34) illustrates this in relation to Generation X religion, which he calls a 'theoretical construct' that developed in Christian pastoral contexts and was subsequently developed by academics. This is borne out by work such as *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (Beaudoin 1998), which considers the interplay of religious presentations in popular culture. *GenX Religion* portrays this age cohort – popularised from Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X* and denoting those born between the 1960s and the early 1980s – as one that embraces pluralism and values subjective knowing above propositional truth (Flory and Miller 2000: 6-9). In *After Religion: 'Generation X' and the Search for Meaning,* Lynch understands Generation X as an 'attitude' that has emerged in the context of capitalism as 'the fixed foundation of social organisation', where 'the meaning of life on a personal level is in flux' (2002: 32). This echoes conceptions of identity in later modernity as a freedom of choice from which one cannot escape and in which construction of the

self is a necessity (Bauman 1988: 62) or the construction of self-identity as a reflexive project in response to the uncertainties of social change (Giddens 1991). Against this backdrop, young adults continue to come under scrutiny for being over-individualistic, or even narcissistic. This mirrors commentary on earlier generations. In writing about US baby boomers and the 'spiritual marketplace', Roof (2001: 6-7) had contended that 'religious energies' revolved around personal meaning rather than social belonging. Later, Smith and Denton (2009: 257-262) viewed American teenagers as having a 'taken-for-granted individualism [that] simply fits many of them with blinders so they are not able to see larger social influences on their lives'. Smith and Denton claimed that these teenagers had no religious beliefs, or articulating 'little more than what seem to be the most paltry, trivial or tangential beliefs'. Day (2011: 90-91) counters this line of thinking, contending that young people have a strong communal identity. Moreover, she views the notion of late modernity as being characterised by individualism as 'a prevailing fiction' that is not consistent with her own research findings, in which informants have relationship-centred and relationship-guided beliefs (2011: 204). Rather than view the actions of YouTubers as individualistic, Lange (2019: 120) pushes back against academic claims of narcissism against YouTubers, employing Sahlins (1972) as a theoretical framework to illustrate how reciprocities are expressed through YouTube comments.

The definition of the X, Y and Z cohorts can seem somewhat arbitrary. Take, for example, Possamai's (2009: 2) suggestion that, 'for argument's sake', baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964; Generation Xers were born between 1965 and 1980; and the Y generation were born between 1981 and 2000. He employs Mannheim's (1923) notion of generational consciousness among people born at a particular point in history to refer to Generations X and Y as 'two similar cohorts and sub-groups of the post-1970s generation, which break with the social and cultural conditions of the baby boomers' (Possamai 2009: 4). While Lynch (2010: 34-36) contends that the study of Generation X religion has made an important contribution to integrating the study of religion, media and popular culture – as well as more sociological consideration of meaning and value beyond institutional religion – Generation X is 'too generalised to be of genuine analytical value' and instead calls for theories that emphasise the 'interplay of agency and structure in varied social contexts [that

31

produces] different forms of engagement with religion'. Day (2013b: 113) also notes the weakness of 'generation' as an analytical tool, although acknowledges that it has 'caught the public imagination'. In this context, the attitudes and traits of a particular age cohort can be brought into being so that these groups can be marketed or evangelised to, which Lynch notes in relation to Generation X (2002: 25). Percy (2019: 169) sketches an emerging religious-spiritual picture of 'far fewer propositions and more performative relationality' for Generation Z, suggesting that this age group's stress on 'experience' – for example, the turn away from material acquisition and to personal attainment – to be one of 'the overwhelming cultural changes' in the twenty-first century. This is pertinent to the object of *Witnesses to the Future.* Ethical veganism, which expresses a deep interconnectedness with non-human animals in the context of the climate emergency, is part of the 'ethical turn' that has taken place over the past two decades around questions of food production and consumption in wealthy nations (Lewis and Huber 2015: 289-91). Awareness of animal agriculture's role in climate change has raised the profile of veganism in recent years, due in part to activist social media content. Strhan and Shillitoe's recent work on the experiences of non-religious children in religious education (2022) reveals that children's concerns with equality and fairness often extend to animals, aligning with Beaman's (2017, 2020) conception of an emerging worldview that accepts religious and non-religious difference. However, the investigation of veganism as a philosophical belief has hitherto received little attention in sociology of religion scholarship. To address this, *Witnesses to the Future* explores the emergence of veganism as a philosophical belief under the Equality Act 2010. Additionally, as will be explored in empirical chapters, this thesis asks how, and to what extent, this belief is formed by one's media practices. The next section outlines the body of digital religion literature that led towards my methodological choices for investigating the mediatised aspects of veganism as a philosophical belief. It also underscores the need for more empirical work to understand how individuals' data-led existences may inform their beliefs and identities.

2.4 Digital religion, mediatisation and ethnography

My research project, in its earlier stages, sought to bring a digital religion perspective to build on the work of Day (2011), which takes belief to be produced by belonging. Furthermore, I wished to respond to Lövheim's (2016b) call for Day's work to be developed using the dimension of mediatisation – in particular, what performativity and sociality mean when relationships are mediated digitally. Mediatisation is a theoretical framework for thinking about the interplay between media, culture and society (Hepp et al 2015), with processes of mediatisation affecting almost all areas of social and cultural life in late modernity (Lundby 2009: 2). Several research streams converged in the mid-2000s to make the concept of mediatisation a necessity, report Couldry and Hepp (2013: 192-194), including the growing role of digital media in everyday life, helped by fast internet access, expansion of web search capacity and social media as a new form of communication. Building on the description of social and cultural reality as being constructed by communicative action (Mead 1962; Berger and Luckmann 1967; Schutz 1972), mediatisation has been defined as a historical, ongoing process in which media are institutionalised and thus relevant 'for the social construction of everyday life, society and culture as a whole' (Krotz 2009: 24). As well as mediatisation scholarship, research into media and religion has received a significant amount of academic attention (Engelke 2010; Hjarvard and Lövheim 2012). Stig Hjarvard (2008: 9) has developed mediatisation's relevance for the study of religion, arguing that religion has become 'subsumed under the logic of the media', a concept he borrows from Altheide and Snow (1979), with processes of mediatisation elevating the media to become the primary sources of religious ideas, moulding religious imagination 'in accordance with the genres of popular culture'. A basic principle of media logic is that events, action and actors' performances reflect information technologies so that communication guidelines become institutionalised to the point whereby they 'guide routine social interactions and thereby become integral in creating, maintaining and changing culture' (Altheide 2015: 1). Hjarvard contends that as cultural environments, media have taken over many of the social functions of institutionalised religions, thus providing moral and spiritual guidance, as well as a sense of community (2008: 9). Elsewhere, Hjarvard (2011: 119) considers the relationship between mediatisation and secularisation on three levels: society, organisation and individual. Mediatisation acts as 'an integral part of

secularisation', while at the level of organisation and the individual, 'mediatisation may both encourage secular practices and beliefs'. He later takes 'a more cautious line of reasoning' (2016: 8) in reference to scholars of religion that claim increased public visibility of religion as a resurgence of religious belief in general. Rather, he argues, religion's visibility is 'a reflection of a general mediatisation of religion through which religious beliefs, agency and symbols are becoming influenced by the workings of various media'.

In a critical appraisal of his work, Lövheim (2011: 157) questions Hjarvard's (2008: 10) contention that mediatisation may be considered part of a gradual secularisation and finds this to be problematic given the criticism of the secularisation thesis in recent years. Elsewhere, she acknowledges a mediation approach, which sees mediation as a part of how religion develops in society and not as a 'weakening' of religion through secularisation. Stolow (2005: 125) considers the phrase 'religion and media' to be a pleonasm, since throughout history, religious communication has always existed – for example in the forms of written texts and ritual gestures – and has encompassed technologies that are thought of as media. Lövheim, therefore, seeks to find middle ground between these different understandings of religion and media, between mediated and mediatised approaches, to propose a theory of media and religion that analyses the mediatisation of religion as a dynamic process through which religion is shaped by the logic of media, but at the same time moulds media to fit with religion's 'particular dynamic of meaning-making' (2016a: 18-19). In following this social-constructivist tradition, she acknowledges Couldry and Hepp (2013) as a starting point. In their introduction to *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (2017), Couldry and Hepp take the 'basic ambition' of Berger and Luckmann (1967) – and indeed in their wordplay on Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* – to account for how social reality in the digital age is constructed when human beings' 'reality' is constructed through social processes. They ask what the consequences are for reality 'if the social itself is *already* mediated; that is, shaped and formed through media?' (2017: 1, authors' italics).

Hjarvard's contention that the media contribute to the development of secular views and practices is, argues Clark (2011), problematic. Instead, she proposes that media could be better understood as 'contributing to different ways of being religious', including ways of being non-religious. She employs the case study of the JK Wedding Entrance Dance, a wedding video uploaded to YouTube in 2009 that subsequently went viral. Clark suggests that the video illustrates the power of acting in religiously meaningful ways 'learned from people who are important to us within our personal networks' rather than religious institutions (2011: 175). Clark adds that media are constituting religion's role and 'enabling us to envision how we might bridge the gaps that separate us […] and how we might identify our places in relation to others and our world' (2011: 181-182). She extends mediatisation with a new definition (2011: 167):

'[…] mediatisation may be understood as the process by which collective uses of communication media extend the development of independent media industries and their circulation of narratives, contribute to new forms of action and interaction in the social world and give shape to how we think of humanity and our place in the world.'

While concurring with Day's work concerning the performance of belief, Lövheim (2016b: 107-108) suggests that mediatisation is a concept that could be developed in Day's 'believing in belonging' thesis, asking what it means for the idea of belief as performative and social in a world where many people's close relationships and sense of belonging are mediated digitally. Lövheim suggests that YouTube is a suitable site to investigate this phenomenon. Harding and Day (2021) respond to this suggestion to show how performances of belief among vegan YouTubers can help scholars better understand shared experience between what may be considered religious or not religious. This article formed the pilot research for *Witnesses to the Future* and is discussed in more detail in *Chapter Three: The Research Journey*.

Witnesses to the Future also acknowledges Clark's envisioning of 'the gaps that separate us' (2011: 181), to investigate how social media can contribute to different ways of being religious, or not being religious. Because of this definitional issue, writes Hoover (2009: 126), the mediatisation of religion is not a simple matter, meaning some conceptual and theoretical challenges must be overcome, such as trying to understand 'what is religion and what is not […] we must be aware of the ways that what might once have been a 'bright line' between and religious and secular realms has become porous'. To capture the blurring of these boundaries, it is important to design research methodologies that create spaces for research participants to articulate uncertainty and ambivalence about their religious and non-religious affiliations.

Although this thesis is concerned with philosophical belief and addresses the blurring of religious and non-religious boundaries in its methodology, it is important to note that non-religion has received scant attention in digital religion studies. Digital religion has been defined as 'the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated' (Campbell 2013: 3). However, this definition fails to address the integration of religious and non-religious spheres. Although not addressing non-religion as a concept, Taira (2022), in calling for mediatisation studies to include secularism and atheism, suggests that digital media spaces have contributed to increased awareness and proliferation of secularism and atheism in the twenty-first century, adding the caveat that this phenomenon is difficult to investigate since digitalisation is not an easily separable independent variable. In a review of digital religion literature from the 1990s to the present, Taira observes that secularism and atheism are 'practically absent'.

Tsuria et al (2017: 79) summarise the lineage of digital religion research in four waves, 'each corresponding to distinct popular and scholarly visions of the internet and characterised by distinct methodological approaches'. The process started with a 'descriptive era', in which scholars described the development of new online phenomena. The second wave was an era of

'categorisations' in which typologies of religious practice on the internet were explored using online ethnography alongside interviews and questionnaires. In the third wave, scholars developed theoretical frameworks for analysing offline religious communities' interactions with new media. Finally, in the fourth wave, religious actors negotiated the 'multiple spheres of their online and offline lives'. Lövheim and Campbell (2017: 11) consider this fourth-wave research – the 'integration and negotiation of religious beliefs, practices, and identities across […] 'online' and 'offline' – as the 'new starting point for current research'. However, distinguishing what is online or offline is not always a helpful distinction (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 456) and the usefulness of making digital media interaction separate from the 'real' has been questioned (Miller et al 2016: 7; Lange 2019: 18-21). Lövheim and Campbell also identify a need for a 'shift of perspective', whereby digital religion scholars shift their focus from organised religious groups and individual believers and instead ask how religious symbols and discourses are used by other actors in society and culture as 'tools to understand and manage life in a digitally saturated world'. Digital ethnography is well-suited to this research aim. For example, one of the contributions of *Witnesses to the Future* is to capture how vegan individuals respond to, and contribute towards, discourses of truth concerning humans' use of non-human animals. Many of these discourses are transmitted online through social media content. Moreover, as discussed in more detail in *Chapter Nine: Vegans as Witnesses to the Future*, vegans also communicate a powerful sense of how their philosophical beliefs carry the potential for self-transformation as well as transforming the world.

As well as capturing areas in which the lines between religion and non-religion are porous, ethnography can also capture tacit cultural manifestations of non-religion that are often invisible (Lee 2012b: 144 and 2015a: 34-35). For example, non-religious material culture (Copeman and Quack 2015: 41) can be investigated ethnographically, such as Katie Aston's study of 'material manifestations of the lived secular' (Aston 2016: 2). This was enacted through multi-sited fieldwork in London with the Rationalist Association and the British Humanist Association – now known as Humanists UK – as well as studying online communities and by using 'texts as ethnography' (2016: 44-53), such as tweets and archival material. Aston took a notably creative approach, exploring the

semiotics of non-religious communication through analysis of the editorial design process – such as typography – of the *New Humanist* magazine (2016: 111). A participant in her study commented that non-religious people do not have representative visual markers, 'unlike […] religious people', which led Aston to question this assumption and highlight 'a wealth of secular humanist visual repertoires' that promoted values such as science (2016: 317). For example, she documented the 'Darwin fish', a visual riff on the Christian ichthys symbol, as well as the Atheist brand of shoes, promoted as being 'for those who live on their feet, not on their knees'. While Aston's study illuminates the semiotics of communication for those that place themselves in opposition to religion, it does not address the visual repertoires of those that are more ambivalent in their non-religious identity, or for those individuals that are unable or unwilling to express their religious or non-religious orientation in binary terms.

Engelke (2015: 138) urges that 'we need to get cracking on the research front' with 'more ethnographies of atheism, of secular humanism, of ambivalent non-religiosity'. Despite the wealth of research investigating non-religious individuals, there remains much scope for scholars to explore the diversity of non-religion, particularly in everyday life and how the non-religious see the world and their place in it (Salonen 2018: 3-4). As Beaman (2017: 16-17) notes, a sizeable proportion of the population does not engage with religion and a 'different, immanent framework from which to understand the world is emerging'. To investigate this framework, a flexible and 'messy' methodology is required that can provoke multidimensional stories (Aston 2016: 43; Day 2016b), to respond to what Trzebiatowska calls (2018: 8), in her study of lived atheism, 'the unplanned and the unexpected'. In investigating the mediatisation of philosophical belief, *Witnesses to the Future* explores a phenomenon that helps to understand a small facet of what it may mean to be non-religious – including the 'unimagined' space of material non-religion (Lee 2015b: 70) – while seeking to add to understanding of philosophical belief as an immanent framework.

2.5 The object of study: veganism as a lived philosophical belief

In setting out the context for my research in this chapter, I have traced the contours and the complexities of the non-religion category, which led me to locating a site of enquiry – veganism as a philosophical belief – that does not explicitly demarcate non-religious individuals but instead encourages research participants to articulate their beliefs in ways that are salient and meaningful to them. This approach is formed, in part, by developments in lived religion literature. Lived religion literature developed to explore the experience of religious people in their everyday contexts (Orsi 2003; Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008), emerging as a critique to analyses of religion that had foregrounded institutions and organisations (Nyhagen 2017: 496). To investigate lived religion is to understand beliefs and practices as a 'subjectively grounded and potentially creative place for religious experience and expression' (McGuire 2008: 12). More recently, as academic attention has turned to non-religious individuals, lived religion scholarship has provided a foundation to investigate the lived experience and everyday practices of non-religious individuals. For example, Trzebiatowska (2018: 2) explores gendered accounts of 'lived atheism', a version of lived religion that investigates the 'collected convictions and ordinary acts' that contribute towards being an atheist woman. Lived non-religion is also researched creatively by Salonen, who suggests that the research of food consumption and its ethical dimensions 'transcends the boundaries between belief and practice, dogma and ethics, and religion and non-religion'. Exploring non-religion through eating, she contends, 'can guide us in studying how people either justify their deeds in order to take care of themselves, despite the acts of harm, or restrict their actions in order to take care of the wellbeing of others' (2018: 12). A similar approach to investigating non-religion through ethical practices is taken by Beaman, who chooses sea turtle rescue as a site 'of action and activism [to contribute] to a deeper understanding of the contours of both religion and non-religion and their relationship to each other' (2017: 9). Beaman (2020: 245-246) has tentatively tried to describe social actions taking place in the current environmental crisis as those that disrupt the binaries of religious, spiritual and non-religious categorisation. Beaman rejects the characterisation of this view as secular – which she has mostly rejected as a term of reference – and calls for more attention to the emerging diversity of religion and non-religion, including the relationship between human and non-human animals. Taking the

approaches of Salonen and Beaman as a starting point, my investigation of veganism as an ethical practice not only builds on understanding these contours of religion and non-religion, but also helps to address the dilemma, as noted by Trzebiatowska (2018: 3), of researching a social category (the unaffiliated non-religious) rather than a group (such as a secularist organisation). My thesis also responds to a methodological challenge identified by Lee (2015a: 34-35), who suggests that ethnographers can make a crucial contribution to identify research sites that are not classified according to their non-religion, thus helping to draw out 'embedded and hidden socio-cultural formations'. As will be explored in later chapters, my research also pays attention to the embodied, affective and sensory aspects of lived philosophical belief. Before concluding this chapter, I turn to the object of this study, ethical veganism, and situate my research as a sociological contribution to understanding veganism as a philosophical belief.

As a political and ethical movement, contemporary veganism in Britain dates to at least the nineteenth century (Kean 1998, cited in Oliver 2022: 36). Hudson (2011: 1659-1660) argues that early advocacy for animal welfare in England was connected to the development of capitalism. Following the Enclosure Acts from the seventeenth century onwards, workers were expelled from the land and populations were displaced from rural to urban areas. Thus, capitalism reshaped how humans and animals interacted with each other – for instance, industrial capitalism freed animals from production processes, leading to the modern animal rights movement in Europe and the US emerging at the same time as the creation of commercial stockbreeding. Oliver (2022: 36) notes that contemporary veganism is situated close to The Vegan Society's definition of veganism as 'a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practicable – all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose'. The Vegan Society, established in England in 1944 after a schism with the British Vegetarian Society, was a 'small, radical and almost completely unfunded' organisation that presented veganism as a way to tackle famine and war, promote good health and address the suffering of non-human animals (Wrenn 2019: 190-192).

While the field of animal studies focuses on the study of non-human animals, sociologists working in critical animal studies (CAS) approach scholarship through explicit advocacy for non-human animals (Peggs 2013: 601). Wright (2021: 7-8) notes that the CAS field was 'codified' following the publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* in 1975, a utilitarian argument advocating for animals that was later countered by Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* (1988), in which Regan presented a deontological argument that who is deserving of rights should not depend on the utility of a given action. Wright adds that more recent CAS scholars have questioned the stability of the categories of human and animal, such as Cavalieri's *The Animal Question* (2001), which argues for the theory of rights that gives all international beings moral status, or Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), which argues against the human conception of rights as Cartesian in nature. Singer, Regan and Derrida, along with Richard Ryder – who used the term 'speciesism' in 1970 to connect species with race and gender (see Ryder 2010) – are what Catherine Oliver (2022: 39) calls the 'legitimisers' of animal activism who have shaped the discourses and action of contemporary veganism, although Oliver also notes that most 'animal work and animal thinking' has been undertaken by women (Probyn-Rapsey et al 2019). For example, feminist, pro-animal theorists such as Carol Adams (1990) have highlighted the limitations of the rights-based approach to animal advocacy – namely that liberalism excludes both women and animals – while Kelly Oliver (2009; 2010) has expressed concerns over extending rights to certain animals while not adequately addressing the hierarchies created among both animal species and human beings (Calarco 2015: 43).

As Cherry (2021: 151) reports, sociology remained a 'wholly anthropocentric' field until the 1970s, until environmental sociologists argued that sociology should examine the relationships between social and natural worlds. Carter and Charles (2018: 79), in considering why sociology has been 'slow to take up the animal challenge', argue that sociology has had a 'fraught relationship' with biology and has made assumptions about human exceptionalism, but argue that this situation can be remedied by regarding non-human animals as embedded in social relationships. The humanities and human sciences have marginalised how central animals are to human life (Cook 2015: 588),

and while human relations with non-human animals are being increasingly recognised and investigated in social inquiry, sociologists often regard such scholarship as marginal to sociology's human focus (Peggs 2013: 591). Citing Noske's (1993) critique of anthropology as being 'profoundly anthropocentric', Nibert (2003: 5) argues that sociology is limited in its benefits to what he calls 'human animals', because the discipline ignores how 'unjust social arrangements are intertwined with the oppressive treatment of other animals'. Peggs (2012: 2) notes that it is curious how sociology has limited the purview of its inquiry to humans alone, especially given that the discipline has, in other regards, a wide sphere of interest. The sociology of human/animal relations, which questions the discipline's anthropocentric assumptions, has laid the ground for the field of vegan studies, which includes sociological studies of veganism (Twine 2018: 167).

Sociological literature about vegans has comprehensively documented how this identity group has been persecuted for their ethical beliefs. While Wright (2021: 3-5) observes that The Vegan Society's definition of veganism assumes that all vegans are vegan for ethical reasons, there exist other reasons – such as dietary and religious – why some people may choose to be vegan. Whatever the reason, Wright adds, the choice to be vegan means participating in the identity category of 'vegan', a non-normative position 'that has often inspired persecution'. There are notable levels of stigma towards vegans reflected in the literature, such as the figure of the 'vegan killjoy' (Twine 2014); online harassment (Potts and Parry 2010); the portrayal of vegans in the media as deviant and marginalised others (Cole and Morgan 2011); and vegans portrayed in the UK press as violent, hypocritical, pushy and irresponsible (Brookes and Chałupnik 2023). As veganism has gained traction, argues Hughes (2021: 581), the mainstream media have expressed hostility towards veganism, representing vegans as violent, misanthropic and irrational (White 2018: 6). Moreover, vegans can suffer mistreatment both in the public and private spheres, for example through harassment or encountering discrimination in the workplace (Horta 2018: 359). In a discursive analysis of vegans' interactions with omnivores, Buttny and Kinefuchi (2020: 565) argue that being vegan is a social positioning in which vegans are aware that they are a minority group standing in opposition to animal-eating culture. Buttny and Kinefuchi's analysis is consistent with Greenebaum (2012a), who argues that

vegans often feel 'silenced' by stereotypes, misinformation and conflict with omnivores. To manage these tensions, the vegans in Greenebaum's study engage in face-saving techniques to protect themselves from alienation and from being attacked by omnivores. Greenebaum's study draws on Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management, which she also uses in another (2012b) study to report how vegans 'negotiate contradictions in their ethics and behaviour' by constructing a sense of authenticity by presenting themselves in relation to non-vegan others.

Concerning the role of animals in religion, they are symbols and subjects in almost every area of religious expression, for example in myth, scripture, visual arts and ethical systems (Gross 2017). Yet, as Kemmerer argues (2012: 9), organised religion fails to offer a meaningful response to the widescale exploitation of animals. Linzey and Linzey (2019: 1-5) argue that despite the moral anthropocentrism that has been influential in many religious traditions, religious insight can also be regarded as 'an appreciation of the other-than-human' – including the other-than-human of God, or a transcendent reality – and that the 'proper religious response' should be one of awe towards the other beings that live alongside humans. Linzey and Linzey add that philosophers such as Tom Regan have argued that individual animals should be granted intrinsic or inherent value, yet the notion of individual animals having this value is not new to ancient religious traditions. Schaefer (2012: 173-174) reports that the field of religious studies has started the work of exploring the relationship between animals and religion, yet the question of what 'religion' means is complex and assumes that the meaning of the word is fixed and has not changed over time. Elsewhere, Schaefer (2017: 23-24) draws from Jonathan Z Smith's (1982) definition of religion as 'solely the creation of the scholar's study', as well as Vásquez's (2011) critique of the dominant canon in religious studies – its sacred texts, for example – and its neglect of popular and lived religion.

As vegan increasingly becomes a household word, reports Covey (2018: 225-226), questions arise concerning what it means to be a vegan – for example, whether it is regarded as a diet, a consumer movement, a philosophy, an ethical system, or indeed all of these things. She adds that the practice

of veganism becomes 'tangled and messy' when it is practised with other identities, as well as with other social, philosophical and legal frameworks. She illustrates this with reference to the pursuit of legal protections for vegans in Ontario, Canada, where in 2015 the Ontario Human Rights Commission updated its discrimination policy to include secular and ethical belief systems in the legal protections afforded to creeds – 'creed' in this policy context as a synonym for 'religion' and specifically excluding secular, moral or ethical beliefs or political convictions. Reporting about veganism as a legally protected religion in the US, Johnson (2019: 30) notes that ethical veganism meets the legal criteria for the definition of 'religion' under US law and that although ethical veganism is not in all cases a religious practice, for those that claim ethical veganism as their religion, it is understood as a protected trait under federal laws and various state laws that outlaw discrimination based on religion, religious beliefs, creed or religious practices. In the UK, McKeown and Dunn (2021: 209) note that while vegan convictions have long fallen within the scope of Article 9 ECHR (European Court of Human Rights) following the 1993 decision in *W vs the United Kingdom*, veganism and vegetarianism as protected philosophical beliefs have only recently been tested in domestic courts and tribunals in England and Wales, such as *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* (2020). Strumos (2021: 1) argues that the reasoning behind the judgement in *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* – in which an employment judge ruled that ethical veganism qualifies as a philosophical belief, one of the nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 – regards ethical veganism as a form of non-religion, which is conceptually distinct from religious belief while also being conceptually entangled with religion. The methodology for *Witnesses to the Future*, however, does not claim that ethical veganism is a form of non-religion and instead emphasises research participants' agency to describe their own conceptions of religion and non-religion.

To conclude, this chapter has discussed and evaluated non-religion and digital religion literature to contextualise the investigation of philosophical belief in this thesis. It also situates one of the project's methodological aims: to create a research space that enables participants to discuss their philosophical beliefs, facilitating an investigation of how individuals position themselves in relation to censuses and surveys that measure their religious and non-religious affiliations. Moreover, it

responds to the methodological challenge of investigating non-religion as a social category, rather than a social group. As already explained, this emphasises the importance of enabling research participants to self-define their identities in ways that are salient and meaningful to them. As a contribution to understanding the field of non-religion, the project also endeavours to capture areas of activity where the boundary between religion and non-religion 'doesn't seem to mean very much at all' (Hutchings 2019: 1). In contrast, participants' identification as ethical vegans are markedly different: they are highly committed to their ethical practices and veganism forms a substantive aspect of their life and behaviour. This responds to a methodological suggestion put forward by Lee (2015b: 68): 'How do [the non-religious] engage with and create moral discourses?'. In investigating and describing the moral discourses of veganism, another contribution of the research is to show that this philosophical belief illustrates the cogency, cohesion and importance of philosophical belief as a 'substantial aspect of human life and behaviour', as defined in the Equality Act 2010 and applied in *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* (2020). In seeking to understand how this philosophical belief is mediatised, the research also investigates the creative acts, such as digital content creation, that research participants employ in acquiring and transmitting their beliefs. This literature review has also located a gap between non-religion and digital religion literature, which is explored further in later empirical chapters, where the mediatised dimensions of philosophical belief are explored. The relationship between religion and new media has been described as a 'vibrant area of enquiry' (Campbell et al 2017: 15) and yet the intersections between non-religion and media remain curiously underdeveloped in this scholarly conversation. While Lövheim and Campbell (2017: 13) have rightly identified the need to develop methods for analysing the visual media of digital religion and culture, it is clear that new ground needs to be broken to analyse visual media in non-religious and philosophical-belief contexts. By investigating how philosophical belief can be formed, acquired and transmitted through media practices, this thesis not only develops qualitative enquiry of the religion or belief category of the Equality Act 2010, but also makes a significant and original contribution to non-religion and digital religion scholarship. The next chapter describes the project's methodology in more detail and explains the decisions that were taken in developing this case study of philosophical belief.

3 The Research Journey

3.1 Beginning the research

Having set out the scholarly context for my research, this chapter explains how the project came into being and the decisions that were taken throughout the research process. It starts with tracing the events that led to my academic interest in understanding the shared experience between religious and non-religious categories. It then explains how my initial PhD proposal, which set out to investigate what I loosely described as 'conscious living' practices, developed into an investigation of philosophical belief. I also explain the circumstances that led to choosing veganism as a case study for this thesis, as well as the literature that informed my choice of methods. The chapter also addresses the relational and ethical concerns of my research design.

My interest in researching the social science of religion was piqued rather unconventionally – by browsing Pinterest. This social media site, whereby users can save, or 'pin', visual content, can best be described as a digital scrapbook. On this platform, between 2014 and 2015, I pinned visual material – art, graphics, photography – that caught my eye. I was intrigued by a recurring theme in this visual material, namely that of living life consciously. I pinned visual material that conveyed this sentiment, including photos and graphics that included such slogans such as 'we tripped on the urge to feel alive'; 'go where you feel most alive; and 'still alive'. I also collected biblical quotes, often from the book of Psalms, written in appealing cursive scripts. As I considered myself to be non-religious, this was a somewhat surprising development. Around the same time as creating the Pinterest board, I had curated a Spotify playlist in which gospel and sacred choral music rubbed shoulders with decidedly unreligious experimental electronic work. In these two facets of my social media use, I noticed that in the choice of art and music I chose to consume, I did not make a sharp distinction between what was religious and what was not. From this self-observation, I formed my first research question: what do non-religious people do online? Wanting to know more about the intersections of religion and non-religion, I returned to higher education and embarked on a master's degree – Religion in Contemporary Society at King's College London – where I eventually addressed the lived experience of religious categorisation in my dissertation fieldwork. As a participant/observer at a

series of Saturday morning mindfulness classes in south London, I was struck by how attendees held a diverse range of viewpoints – religious, spiritual, scientific – although their collective mindfulness practice was grounded in an acceptance of the religious or non-religious other. This gave me cause to reflect on my own ambivalence about being non-religious, particularly the discomfort I feel in declaring 'no religion' on official forms, which does not capture my upbringing: best-described as non-church-attending but strongly identifying Church of England nominalism (see Day 2011: 174). Moreover, my religious and non-religious affiliations had changed over the course of my adult life. I first identified as an atheist, then as agnostic. Sporadically, I found myself attracted to various forms of religious and spiritual practice. For example, the in-laws from my first marriage had been Quakers and when I joined them one Sunday to attend a meeting, I was intrigued by the practice of waiting and listening as we sat in silence. Several years after this marriage ended, I went through a period of visiting churches, seeking comfort in silent reflection as I sat uncomfortably on a wooden pew. Subsequently, when asked to declare my affiliations through surveys and official forms, I considered myself to sit somewhere between the options on offer, unsure of which box to tick or for what purpose I was being required to make a choice. Significantly, my use of social media afforded me a relationship to religion – particularly its cultural objects, such as art and music – without having to be religious or be part of a religious community. Thus, my official declaration of non-religiosity on forms and surveys is informed by a certain ambivalence about identifying as a non-religious individual. Later, I would encounter Lois Lee's (2015b: 68) hypothesis that spoke to this ambivalence:

> 'Unreligious people respond to religious themes, questions and practices in ways that are similar to but markedly distinct from religious or spiritual responses, but which are not primarily anti-religious, not necessarily rationalist, scientific or even non-theistic; these responses shape their engagements with religious people and objects. They are non-religious in ways we need to newly conceive of.'

While my doctoral project did not start life as an investigation of philosophical belief, it came from a desire to understand shared experience between the religious and non-religious categories. Certainly, my own position as a non-religious individual shaped my research topic. When I first encountered Lee's hypothesis for the first time, I reflected on my own responses to religious themes, questions and practices while also – if rather ambivalently – identifying as a non-religious individual.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2019: 168) have written of research as having a funnel structure and that over the course of research 'one discovers what the research is really about'. Occasionally, these concerns are somewhat different from the problems that had been anticipated initially. During the four years from my initial research proposal to sitting my PhD upgrade examination, the focus of my thesis shifted incrementally from what I initially envisaged as a study of online spiritual expression into an investigation of veganism as a philosophical belief, particularly its mediatised aspects. In late 2017, I sent a research proposal to Abby Day at Goldsmiths, University of London that identified how emerging digital technologies had accelerated and intensified 'spiritual expression online, in the form of what could be termed conscious living'. I provided some sketches of trends I had observed on social media platforms. These digital phenomena included wellness, self-care and journalling, as well as social media influencers' content concerning gratitude, kindness and altruism. While I had initially framed some of these online discourses as spiritual, in retrospect this was a rather tentative attempt to locate my observations within a body of literature concerning spirituality that did not quite fit with what I was observing on social media platforms. As I commenced my PhD, I began to situate my work in the field of non-religion. I reconnected with my earlier question of what non-religious people do online, as well as explore the impact of digital technology on selfhood (Lupton 2012), which I felt would be suited to investigation through digital ethnography. Through my reading, I also started to identify a gap in non-religion literature, namely in how non-religious actors construct their non-religious identity through their use of digital media. While there is an established body of scholarship on religion and digital technologies that explores the intersection of new media technologies, religion and digital culture (Campbell et al 2017), I discerned a significant gap in literature about the intersection of digital religion studies with non-religion studies. While

acknowledging Engelke's (2015: 138) call for more ethnographies of ambivalent non-religiosity, my research would later develop into beyond researching what it may mean to be non-religious and broaden into a study addressing the religion or belief category of the Equality Act 2010. This point will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

In a doctoral funding proposal that I submitted in the second term of my PhD, I proposed that my research would analyse participants' ontological relationship with the technology they use, seeking to understand how digital technologies mediate the construction and communication of non-religious identities. At this time, I was particularly interested in conducting research with non-religious young adults: individuals born in the late 1990s and early 2000s who are sometimes termed digital natives, since they are the first generation to grow up with the internet from an early age. As the British Social Attitudes survey revealed (2019: 1-2) at around the time of submitting my funding proposal, the number of people with no religion, who were not brought up in a religion, increased from 11 per cent in 1998 to 23 per cent in 2018. My funding proposal outlined how I would investigate the role between individuals' digital media use and the formation of their non-religious identities through conducting research with young adults, using digital methods. The application for funding was unsuccessful, but also served some utility in identifying the difficulties of locating individuals who identify as non-religious. When I employed terms such as 'non-religion' or 'no religion' in online searches to locate sample groups, I found that this would often lead to content that was hostile to religion – such as atheism – rather than indistinct forms of being non-religious. Thus, the question of how to create a research design that would capture indistinct forms of non-religion remained a methodological puzzle.

In 2019, I read Lori Beaman's (2017) article Living Well Together in a (Non)Religious Future, which described her encounter with non-religious people who rescue sea turtles. This sparked Beaman's sociological imagination and developed into a study that employs sea turtle rescue as a site for thinking about what she calls the contours of religion and non-religion, as well as the complexities of

non-religious identity. This prompted me to think about my own work and how to approach the complexities of non-religion – and the shared experience between religious and non-religious groups – without necessarily recruiting individuals who identified themselves as non-religious. Soon after reading Beaman's work, I gave a presentation of my work-in-progress to fellow sociology researchers at Goldsmiths. Discussing my doctoral work with others helped me to recognise the methodological difficulties I found myself mired in. So far in my PhD, I had been trying to create a research design that would enable me to locate non-religious individuals; however, my literature review had also identified the difficulties of investigating a social category rather than a group (Trzebiatowska 2018: 3). Through discussion and reflection, I acknowledged that so far in my PhD, I had been increasingly trying to fit my investigation and research design around the survey category of non-religion, which pulled me further away from the online phenomena I had identified at the beginning of my PhD, namely the visual culture of ethical living that I had taken an interest in prior to my master's degree. Although living ethically is not non-religious per se, I wished to employ ethical living as a methodology to explore a small aspect of being non-religious, while also offering some flexibility to investigate the lived entanglements of religion and non-religion. Shortly after the work-in-progress presentation in early 2020, just before Covid-19 lockdown restrictions came into force for the first time, I took the decision to refine the earlier iterations of my research – investigating practices of 'conscious living' – into investigating forms of ethical living. I had spent some time conducting exploratory fieldwork into forms of ethical living on social media and found a rich seam of digital content in which content creators used ethical concerns as topics for discussion: for example, making ethical consumer choices; practising sustainability; low- and zero-waste lifestyles, such as minimalism; slow living; environmentalism; and lifestyle choices such as veganism. These ideas would later be refined into a focus on veganism. The next section discusses my reason for choosing this sample group.

3.2 Refining the research: pilot project, July 2020 to February 2021

During the first half of 2020, I gradually narrowed the focus of my investigation from a looser grouping of ethical-living practices online – for example, those who make social media content about zero-

waste and anti-consumption practices – to the more specific group of ethical vegans. Given the prevalence of vegan content on social media, I felt that veganism presented a strong case study from which to investigate the mediatisation of philosophical belief. The decision to choose this group was bolstered by a legal ruling, *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* (2020), in which an employment tribunal concluded that ethical vegans are entitled to similar legal protections in British workplaces as those who hold religious beliefs. The ruling in favour of ethical vegan Jordi Casamitjana is significant: in Great Britain, 'religion or belief' is one of nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, protecting British citizens from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. Having taken the decision to use veganism as a case study for my research project, I had the opportunity to conduct some pilot research by co-authoring a paper with Abby Day for the journal *Religions*, the work for which was undertaken between July and November 2020. The resulting article, Vegan YouTubers Performing Ethical Beliefs, takes as its starting point the *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* tribunal. It uses empirical data, in the form of 15 'my vegan story' videos on YouTube, to show how vloggers circulate narratives about how they formed their ethical beliefs. It also demonstrates how vegan YouTubers acknowledge that their beliefs are partly shaped through the social action of other ethical vegans on social media. This is instrumental in the formation of their vegan beliefs and practices, often prompting them to create their own social media content to communicate their beliefs to others. The 'story time' format is understood as what Day (2011: 43) describes a performative 'belief narrative', which offers researchers a richer opportunity to understand belief and related identities than a closed-question survey. As Manyukhina (2017: 596) notes, ethical consumption can be 'complex and diverse in its performances and understandings'. Following the *Religions* article, my later fieldwork sought to build on the findings of the pilot research and to investigate how veganism as a philosophical belief is, in part, a mediatised process.

In Vegan YouTubers Performing Ethical Beliefs, a content creator was described as an individual producing social media content (such as blogs, vlogs, livestreams and photo feeds) that caters to a target audience. The target audience in this case was other vegans or those considering veganism

as an ethical choice. Content creators that focused on the dietary or health aspects of their veganism were not sought for inclusion in the study, because their YouTube content did not clearly indicate that they were vegan for ethical reasons. Participants were initially recruited using the email that they provided on their YouTube 'about' page. While the small sample in the paper was not generalisable to the wider population, it aimed to generate rich insight about vegan belief. The paper employed the theoretical insight of existing work about the mediatisation of religion (for example Hjarvard 2008) and non-religious belief (Day 2011) to interpret data so that a conceptual framework could be produced concerning the nature of philosophical belief as a mediatised process. Data were coded using a thematic analysis, employing three dimensions of belief: rational belief; felt belief (belief that is emotional, material and embodied); and performative belief (belief created through social action, as well as belief that creates social action). This approach was informed by Day's 'trinity of belief' (2016c: 61), a secularised analytical tool to aid researchers in understanding how different modes of belief are experienced, whether on their own or overlapping with each other. This analytical framework provided a starting point for the analysis of data generated through my main fieldwork period. Although I chose not to use the trinity of belief as a coding framework after the pilot fieldwork, performativity and affect became central theoretical themes in my data analysis, which are discussed in later empirical chapters.

Several issues were generated through the pilot research, in the form of the *Religions* article, and pre-field research. The article concretised one of the main aims of my research: to explore how philosophical belief among vegans is a mediatised process. By using Day's (2016c: 61) trinity of belief as a framework for interpreting vegans' beliefs, I created a starting point for further analysing the performative and affective aspects of veganism in subsequent fieldwork. The paper also demonstrated that the philosophical beliefs of YouTube vegans are substantive and cogent, giving weight to the *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* ruling of 2020. Casamitjana himself published *Ethical Vegan* at the end of 2020, reflecting on the employment tribunal and his life experiences of being an ethical vegan. He comments that while he knows many atheists who do not use the term 'belief' as they associate it with religion, 'not all beliefs are religious […] it only means

you are certain about it (perhaps because of the evidence you analysed) and as such it is synonymous with a 'conviction'' (2020: 82). In the context of these discussions about philosophical belief, the paper generated issues to explore in further fieldwork: belief transmission; how belief is mediatised; how belief is performed against the normative behaviour of consuming animals; and notions of 'truth' in vegan media discourse. In summary, the paper crystallised my research aims to investigate veganism as a philosophical belief, namely:

- To trace how a philosophical belief comes into being through one's media practices and to understand how an ethical vegan's reality is constructed through what they see and do online (their media practices);
- To understand how philosophical belief is mediatised and how philosophical belief is potentially moulded through the technical affordances of social media platforms; and
- To understand how performance produces social life and how an individual becomes an ethical vegan through these 'technical', algorithmically mediated performances.

While YouTubers Performing Ethical Beliefs was out for peer review in December 2020, I conducted observational research on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram to build on what I had learned writing the paper and to consider what I wished to explore further. My strategy employed Burrell (2009: 190) to find 'entry points' into the research. The first entry point was the transcripts of videos used for the *Religions* paper, which had generated data about how vegans transmitted their philosophical beliefs to others. Hine (2000: 60) suggests that ethnographers might start fieldwork from a particular place but are encouraged to 'follow connections made meaningful from that setting'. Using as a starting point the 'my vegan story' narratives used in Harding and Day (2021), my observations turned to vegan and anti-vegan discourse on YouTube, Instagram and Facebook – and, to a lesser extent, TikTok – to follow current issues about veganism and how they are discussed both by vegans and non-vegans. Working with Hine's (2017: 315) suggestion of interrogating how others experience and navigate a socially constructed, technologically mediated landscape, I set out to map connections

between ethical-vegan content creators, their audiences and the places they inhabit online. This resulted in identifying three groups of interest:

Ethical-vegan activists: These UK-based ethical-vegan activists have relatively small subscriber numbers yet are very active on YouTube and generate debate with other content creators and their audiences. They constitute a community of content creators that know each other, make content with each other and engage in vegan activism together. This activism takes place both through their digital content, as well as face to face (for example, some of them visit slaughterhouses to document animal agriculture practices or they conduct outreach work with the public). Some content creators are generally newer to vegan activism. They work with a variety of video formats: for example, live discussions; reaction videos; interviews with other vegans; and Q&As with their online audiences. Other content creators have participated in pre-internet animal activism in the 1970s to 1990s. Their discussions tend to focus on the current state of vegan activism in a wider historical context: for example, the commercialisation of veganism in recent years.

Ethical-vegan activist influencers: There are also several higher-profile vegan activists (operating on YouTube, Instagram and Facebook) who make engaging content about animal welfare and veganism as an ethical stance. Some of these activists also make appearances in mainstream media such as TV or the national press. Another high-profile group is Anonymous for the Voiceless (AV), a well-funded global animal advocacy group with branches (chapters) across the world, including the UK. AV produces professional-standard visual content that starkly conveys the suffering of animals for maximum impact on social media channels.

Vegan communities (including activists, non-activists, new vegans and the vegan-curious): Discussion about veganism and its ethical aspects takes place in dedicated discussion forums on Facebook and Instagram. While much of the discussion among this audience for ethical-vegan content is concerned with food consumption and non-consumption, group posters also talk about

current issues in veganism. On Facebook, group posters discuss the media messaging of organisations such as the National Farmers Union, or pro-dairy campaigns, and share their plans to disrupt this messaging, for example by setting up parody accounts or subverting hashtags.

Having mapped out these loose groups of interest, my observations involved engaging in exploratory practices of following the concerns and issues that these groups discussed and made content about. In late 2020 into early 2021, I used YouTube, Facebook and Instagram to follow several issues that vegans were discussing on social media. These issues included: debates around intersectional veganism; perceptions of veganism as a marker of privilege; perceptions of vegans as 'preachy', 'extreme' or a 'cult'; the 'mainstreaming' of veganism and its appropriation by retailers and food manufacturers; discussions about the language of activism, such as the use of the term 'holocaust' to describe animal agriculture; and notions of 'truth' about animal consumption set against the 'lies' of the agriculture business. Following such issues as these, and noting how activists discuss them and make digital content about them, was instrumental to the development of my research as it investigated the discourses surrounding veganism as a philosophical belief and enabled me to understand how these beliefs are transmitted and mediatised. In the first quarter of 2021, once ethical approval to conduct fieldwork had been granted to me by my university department, I started to enter the field that I had been creating incrementally since 2017, when I had first conceived the initial ideas for my research project.

3.3 Main fieldwork period, March 2021 to March 2022

Once fieldwork commenced in March 2021, I started recruiting participants through a purposive sampling method using YouTube, Instagram and Facebook. Writing Vegan YouTubers Performing Ethical Beliefs also enabled me to identify a purposive sample that targeted a specific philosophical-belief group: UK-based ethical-vegan content creators and their audiences. Emmel (2013: 3) describes purposive sampling as a means by which reflexive researchers can develop theory from the data as an intellectual puzzle about the social world, with the validity of the findings resting on

interrogating the routes by which truth claims are made. Mason (2002: 127) notes that purposive sampling is an organic process, 'shaped and formed by what the researcher wants to achieve analytically'. Palys (2008: 2) suggests that researchers employing purposive sampling must ask themselves what they want to accomplish and what they want to know; subsequently, sampling requires the researcher to take a series of strategic choices. By choosing purposive sampling, my aim was to explore the mediatisation of philosophical belief employing a case study of veganism, through recruiting vegan content creators and their audiences as participants. The YouTubers that gave their permission for transcripts of their 'my vegan story' video to be used for the *Religions* paper enabled me to make the first step in achieving my one of my analytical aims: to understand how belief narratives are mediatised. It also enabled me to make strategic choices about which types of vegans would help me to understand philosophical belief – for example, activist ethical vegans rather than dietary vegans. I continued this sampling strategy when I recruited participants in the main fieldwork period. As I continued to browse social media platforms, as I had for pilot fieldwork, I identified and contacted content creators on YouTube and Instagram and invited them to participate in my study. Later into fieldwork, I recruited more participants through vegan forums on Facebook, with the permission of the forum moderators.

All interviews were conducted using videoconferencing tool Zoom, with the exception of one interview that was conducted using the video call facility on WhatsApp, following the participant's wishes. Face-to-face interviews have been regarded as a gold standard in research for their rigour and validity (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006: 390), with online interviews presented as a second choice (Deakin and Wakefield 2014: 603) when face-to-face interviewing is not possible. However, conducting interviews using Zoom, while a necessity because of ongoing Covid-19 restrictions at the time of fieldwork, also presented to participants the convenience of being able to participate in the research while remaining in their home surroundings. This afforded them a familiar domestic environment in which they could share their experiences of becoming and being vegan. Because of participants' ease with being in a familiar setting, conducting interviews remotely did not necessarily make rapport more challenging to establish (Weller 2017: 623). Using Zoom was also extremely

cost-effective and presented an opportunity to conduct research with vegans across the UK without incurring travel costs, as well as being able to speak with vegans in other countries. Conversations lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured and questions varied depending on the individual circumstances and preoccupations of the participant. Alongside the interviews, I conducted a digital ethnography. Next, I provide the context for why this research method was chosen for the study, before discussing my online self-representation as researcher and its implications for data collection and analysis.

Ethnographic approaches to digital media can be thought of as a 'complex disciplinary tree' at the intersection of communication research and social science studies of technology (Abidin and de Seta 2020: 5). While theoretical work in the 1990s addressed the arrival of the posthuman subject (Castells 1996; Negroponte 1996; Turkle 1995), few anthropologists conducted work with emergent digital technologies (Coleman 2010: 489), although some digital ethnographic work was being conducted (for example Baym 1994; Ito 1996). The first studies of using ethnographic methods on the internet conceived of the internet as a new social space – cyberspace, coined from William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) – that was immaterial, a place in which disembodied selves formed virtual communities (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz 2013: 3-4) and learned to live in new virtual worlds. Commenting on this disembodiment, Turkle (1999: 643) commented that 'we may find ourselves alone as we navigate virtual oceans […] But increasingly, when we step through the looking glass, other people are there as well'.

Abidin and de Seta (2020: 6) propose that from the early 2000s, the efforts to use anthropological methods in new media can be regarded as a spectrum from two opposite poles. On one pole is the 'ethnographic approach to the internet' of Miller and Slater (2000) and on the other is Hine's 'virtual ethnography' (2000). What unites both approaches is that they both broke with notions of cyberspace and instead proposed a situated study of the internet. While Miller and Slater investigated the impact of the internet in Trinidad by focusing on how technology is used in 'real life' communities – and with

it resisting the notion of cyberspace as placeless and culture-less (Underberg and Zorn 2013: 13) – Hine contextualised the use of the internet by following a news story, using the 1997 trial of Louise Woodward, a British nanny who was tried in a US court for the murder of a baby that had been in her care. In both studies, the internet is not treated as separate from the 'real' world, but rather online and offline ethnographic contexts are deeply interconnected and integrated (Barassi: 2017: 7). Hine (2000) built on the early work of the 1990s and from this basis, ethnographic methodology literature was consolidated in the years that followed (Pink et al 2016: 4). One approach was termed 'connective ethnography' (Hine 2007; Leander and McKim 2003), which mixed methods and strategies for studying online/offline contexts, while also constructing the fieldsite as a network mapped from the social relationships of participants and their relationships to physical or virtual locations (Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz 2013: 7). As the 2000s progressed, 'cyberspace' evolved into what became popularised as Web 2.0, a shift towards user-generated content that envisioned the internet with a sense of teleological purpose (Beer 2009: 986). As well as being a descriptor for software, Web 2.0 has also been conceptualised as a free-market ideology that originated in San Francisco, which celebrated social technologies as 'set of widely held beliefs that increasing the adoption of computer technologies brings positive social consequences' (Marwick 2013: 23).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, social researchers attempted to make sense of these emerging technologies through a range of methodological approaches, including hypermedia ethnography (Dicks, Coffey, Mason and Atkinson 2005); multimodal ethnography (Dicks, Soyinka and Coffey 2006); virtual-world ethnography (Boellstorff 2008, 2012; Nardi 2010); and social media ethnography (Postill and Pink 2012). As Abidin and de Seta (2020: 7) note, researchers have increasingly narrowed their fields through more specific methodology, one of which is digital ethnography. In their prospectus for digital anthropology, Horst and Miller's (2012: 3) first principle is that the digital 'intensifies the dialectical nature of culture' and define the term 'digital' as 'all that which can be ultimately reduced to binary code, but which produces a further proliferation of particularity and difference'. Put another way, Horst and Miller emphasise the reality of digital existence for both users and for anthropological research (Singler 2020: 2). Murthy (2008: 837-838)

notes that despite the ubiquity of digital technologies, their uptake into popular sociological research methods is still limited, concluding that combining physical and digital ethnography gives researchers a larger array of methods, although the epistemological remit 'remains much the same […] ethnography is about telling stories'. For example, digital ethnography can be employed as a method for adapting ethnographic storytelling techniques across multiple forms of new media, building on ethnography that is understood as narrative (Underberg and Zorn 2013: 10, following Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988). As discussed in sections *3.1 Beginning the research* and *3.2 Refining the research*, my project shifted from initial observations of online discourses of what I termed 'conscious living' into a more focused investigation of veganism as a philosophical belief, including its mediatised aspects. While the focus of my investigation shifted over time, the choice to conduct a digital ethnography did not, since this method is well-suited to capturing participants' stories. It also encourages individuals to reflect on their beliefs and identities in the context of their media practices.

One of the first challenges in fieldwork concerned my self-representation as a researcher and how to present myself among the group that I wished to do research with. In creating a digital fieldsite, I aimed to create a space in which I could not only observe the contours of online vegan activism, but also connect with potential research participants. This involved setting up accounts on YouTube and Instagram that would present me as a sociologist investigating veganism. I was concerned that my username should not include the word vegan, as I did not want to imply that I was a vegan conducting research with other vegans. This, I felt, would be unethical and would lead to participants assuming that I was also vegan. In her ethnographic work with beauty influencers – influencers being individuals that build a reputation for their expertise and can affect the purchasing decisions of their audiences – Abidin (2020: 57) reports that in gaining the trust and acceptance of her informants, she found it crucial to enact her visibility, 'via both physical interactions and digital traces', as an ethnographer who was curious and sincere about the work of the content creators she did research with. Thus, her 'digital personae' were an important part of her self-presentation as ethnographer**.** While investigating ethical-vegan content creators and their audiences, my visibility in the field clearly conveyed my role as a sociologist researching philosophical belief among vegan content creators.

While I consider this belief to be cogent and substantive, it was somewhat more challenging to leave digital traces – such as comments – because as a non-vegan, it would potentially have implied that I was vegan myself. This left me somewhat hesitant to interact with vegans in the digital spaces of comment boxes and discussion threads. As a result, I struggled to get closer to the phenomenon I was trying to understand (Back 2002), which I discuss further in *Chapter Seven: Vegan Testimony and the Digital Sensory Encounter*. This predicament provoked an anxiety for me as a researcher. As a non-vegan, I was concerned that my outsider status would prevent me from participating in the online activity of the people that I wanted to do research with, which in turn would affect the quality of the data I would be able to gather. For my fieldwork on Instagram and YouTube, I chose the name ethicalacademic, which captured my positioning as a researcher investigating philosophical belief. I also wrote a short note under my username to state that I was a doctoral researcher conducting a sociological PhD about ethical veganism, along with the date range of my fieldwork. Later, in interviews, the subject of my own ethical stance arose naturally and I was able to discuss my non-vegan status with participants. Some of them made an assumption that I was vegan; others questioned me why I was not vegan; and others encouraged my curiosity in their philosophical beliefs and encouraged me to become vegan. Interviews granted me ample opportunities to discuss my positionality with participants, which later influenced my post-field analysis of veganism within the framework of witnessing theory. A notable outcome of my reflexive approach to data analysis is that while I clearly saw the oppression of animals in fieldwork through the digital content that I watched, I did not take action upon what I saw. This is discussed in more detail in *8.5 The researcher as potential witness*, while my experience of seeing but not witnessing is discussed further in *Chapter Four: The Witness*. In the months following the end of fieldwork, I read witnessing theory and sifted through the initial data analysis I had produced while conducting fieldwork. This constituted an iterative-inductive approach in which ethnography moves back and forth between theory, analysis and interpretation of data (O'Reilly 2005, 2009).

Another challenge in conducting a digital ethnography concerned choosing the digital spaces in which I would engage with veganism as a philosophical belief. As I conducted fieldwork, I generated

data through observing vegan discourses on social media channels, recording in my fieldnotes the debates that I was following, or videos that I had watched. As already stated, I also conducted 24 semi-structured interviews during my year of fieldwork and considered informants' stories of becoming and being vegan in light of the content I was watching on different social media platforms. Often, informants would tell me about the content that they watched and I would use this information to follow their interests and preoccupations. In articulating multi-sited research, 'designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations', Marcus (1995: 105-106) suggests that ethnographers engage in a practice of following – for example following people, things, metaphors, stories, biography and conflict. This approach has been taken up by anthropologists including Scheper-Hughes, whose 2004 ethnography of organ-trafficking saw her employ the 'epistemological motto' of 'follow the bodies' to visit multiple sites such as morgues, hospitals and refugee camps; and Tsing (2015), who follows the object of a matsutake mushroom through its commodity chains to consider how humans can survive collaboratively in the face of capitalist destruction. In The Ethnographic Fieldsite as a Network, Burrell (2009: 190) elaborates on Marcus's proposal of following to explore the fieldsite 'as a network that incorporates physical, virtual and imagined spaces', suggesting that ethnographers seek entry points rather than sites, making a 'strategic decision' about positions to take in the network and to practise Hine's (2000: 60) suggestion of starting from a particular place but following connections that are rendered meaningful from that starting place.

However, employing Burrell's metaphor of fieldsite as network should also be approached cautiously. De Seta (2020: 82-83) reports that when he embarked on his fieldwork about the media practices of digital media users in China, he found himself 'comfortably adapting' the field-as-network paradigm, yet came to realise that his 'idealised reliance on weaving fields as networks was built on lying about something' and that he often found himself 'grasping at straws and immediately cutting away most of what came along with them'. This is a predicament already articulated by Strathern (1996) and one that is made more complicated by the move from a bounded fieldsite to networks. In a hypermedia environment, digital ethnographers have an extremely wide range of potential digital

material at their disposal, but this can present tortuous dilemmas about which material to 'follow' and which networks to 'cut'. It potentially leaves the digital ethnographer in the mire of what Postill and Pink (2012: 125), describe as a 'messy web', which invokes Law (2004) and O'Reilly (2005: 170) to describe the complexity of ethnography and social life. However, ethnographic travelling can be experienced as a recognition of its juxtapositions, discontinuities and its fragmentary encounters (Greverus 2002: 37). This may produce knowledge in a messy, 'ragged' way (Law 2004: 18-19).

My anxiety about being an outsider was compounded by the fact that I was conducting all my research online, which prompted concern about whether I was missing the opportunity to meet informants face to face. In *Chapter Six: Veganism as a Practice of Affective Witnessing*, I write about the vegan bubble, an imaginary space in which vegan activists express doubts that their ethical messages will not reach the people that they want to reach. In fieldwork, I felt firmly on the outside of that bubble, as a non-vegan unable to participate in activism. Additionally, I was concerned that by conducting research entirely online, I would not be able to collect the rich data required to produce an ethnographic account of veganism as a philosophical belief. As discussed in *Chapter Seven: Vegan Testimony and the Digital Sensory Encounter*, this apprehension was illustrated by meeting an activist called Eve, who I interviewed via a WhatsApp call in November 2021. When she appeared on the screen of my phone, it was late afternoon and she was wrapped in a dressing gown. She spoke to me from a caravan in the animal sanctuary where she was volunteering. She said that she had finished her work for the day and that she had just finished feeding pigs. This particular comment made me keenly aware of my occasional frustration in conducting online interviews, because I found it difficult to generate a more detailed description of Eve beyond what I could see on my smartphone screen. In this instance, I found myself wanting to be with Eve at the sanctuary, to participate with her and her volunteering there, in the hope that it would give me more chances for thicker ethnographic description. While comfortable in my choice of conducting research online, I still felt a certain disquiet about not being in face-to-face presence with informants and thus encountering challenges to generate sufficient description to be able to tell their stories. However, in conducting research entirely online as a non-vegan travelling through online spaces, encountering activist

content for the first time, I experienced vegans' digital content from the standpoint of a potential new vegan, who could be transformed by what I watched online. In following digital content through my fieldwork, I reflected on the ways in which what I saw carried the potential to transform myself. As I discuss further in *Chapter Four: The Witness*, while I saw, I did not witness. I became keenly aware of the power of vegan transformation, but I stopped short of transforming myself. This led to later analysis of how veganism communicates the potential for transformation, which is discussed in *Chapter Nine: Vegans as Witnesses to the Future*. Hine (2017: 25) suggests that a researcher's preoccupations and theoretical curiosity brings a field into being. Considered retrospectively post-field, my perceived separation of myself as non-vegan from the vegans I observed and spoke to was instrumental in creating my field, enabling me to conceive of vegan belief as performative, embodied and affective.

While presence can be a challenge for the digital ethnographer, conducting research entirely or largely online need not entail what Hine (2011: 6) calls 'drastically different dilemmas' from traditional face-to-face ethnographies. In reflecting on conducting long-distance fieldwork, Postill (2016: 66-67) identifies two anxieties: the ethnographic fear of missing out and the 'anthropological aversion to thin descriptions'. Working in a digital field may raise concerns about sufficient access to informants and leave the researcher with a sense of malaise about 'not being there', notes Seaver (2017: 7), who employs the Malinowskian imaginary of 'sudden and thorough fieldwork access' to suggest that ethnographic access is an imaginary in itself, a 'protracted, textured practice that never really ends […] no social scene becomes simply available to an ethnographer because she has shown up'. Olwig and Hastrup (1997: 8) suggest that instead of conceiving the field as a site, it can be understood as a set of relations between actors and the connections between them in multiple locations. The challenge for the ethnographer is to map these connections. As Hine (2017: 315) notes, there are inherent difficulties in constructing a fieldsite that captures complex online/offline connections and developing enough immersion and co-presence to make sense of the connections that have been made. Her suggestion is to interrogate 'a socially constructed yet technologically

mediated landscape' by 'interrogating how others experience it and mapping the ways in which it becomes meaningful to those who navigate its complexities'.

However, the distinction between online/offline has also been critiqued. In Mobility and Proximity (2002), John Urry suggested that the distinction between online and offline would gradually dissolve, given that 'networked ties exist in both physical space and cyberspace'. Writing of a 'personalised wireless world', Urry suggested that it is possible to 'sense the other, without physically moving oneself or without moving physical objects […] Being on the screen involves a strange combination of proximity and distance, nearness and farness, what is virtual and what is non-virtual'. Rogers (2013: 19-38), in his Digital Methods research paradigm, rejects the real/virtual distinction, suggesting that 'the conceptual point of departure is the recognition that the internet is not only an object of study but also a source' of data, method and technique whereby the end of the real/virtual divide heralds a rethinking of the internet as a source of data about society and culture. Caliandro and Gandini (2017: 218), building on Rogers' work, reject what they call 'digital dualism', arguing that researchers should no longer make the online/offline distinction; rather, online should no longer be regarded as an 'other' space but one in which participants' self-presentation takes place. Thus, the medium is employed as 'a powerful methodological device'. Moreover, physical face-to-face contact with participants does not automatically provide more meaning or more valid answers in research. An example is Boellstorff's ethnography of 3D virtual world Second Life (2008), in which he created an avatar and conducted interviews while entirely in the game. Boellstorff rejected the rationale for meeting residents in the 'actual world' and argued that the virtual world was a sufficient context for conducting research (2008: 61). Duggan (2017: 1), in questioning digital ethnography in an age of ubiquitous computing, challenges the virtual/real and online/offline binaries, invoking Couldry and Hepp's (2017) argument that social life is now – perhaps irreversibly – deeply mediated by computational communication technologies. As my research approaches philosophical belief within this theoretical frame of deep mediatisation, there seems to be little analytic purchase in making a distinction between how social actors construct their realities in a 'real' or 'virtual' context. Ethnography's main methodological orientation is that it studies first-hand 'what people do and say

in particular contexts [...] electronic virtuality is now embedded within actuality', such as in the case of smartphones (Hammersley 2006: 8). As Madianou's (2016) study of transnational practices in polymedia environments demonstrates, there is much value in the methodological orientation of 'ambient co-presence', whereby an 'intense awareness of distant others' is made possible 'through the affordances of ubiquitous media environments'. In this way, she argues, new technology is making possible data collection at a distance. Madianou (2015: 1) suggests that polymedia – a term developed with Daniel Miller (Madianou and Miller 2012, 2013) – shifts scholars' attention from thinking about social media platforms as discrete platforms to a wider notion of media environments that are navigated by their users 'to suit their communicative needs'. Hine (2017: 325) extends the idea of navigation to suggest that social researchers treat the complexity of the digital environment 'as a landscape that people simultaneously navigate and bring into being […] The task of the ethnographer becomes not one of mapping the technological landscape in any objective sense but rather to capture the subjective experience of living in such a landscape'. In this landscape, the virtual should not be separate from human actions and experience but is an integral part of it; thus, the field should be defined based on the research topic rather than arbitrarily excluding the spheres of online or offline social life (Garcia et al 2009: 54). Certainly, my reflections on what I observed in virtual fieldwork, and what informants told me in interviews, travelled far beyond my laptop. My discomfort in the field and my positioning as outsider to the group I was investigating informed my data analysis, particularly in tracing the relationship between affect and performativity. The research required me to reflect on my own ethical practices, including my failure to take action on the beliefs that informants communicated to me. In this sense, I created a fieldwork network of physical, virtual and imagined spaces (Burrell 2009: 181).

In using YouTube, Facebook and Instagram to conduct research, my ethnographic object-making was partly shaped by what these platforms' proprietary algorithms chose to show me about the culture-sharing group that I was investigating. Information technology now constitutes, rather than merely mediates, social life (Burrows 2009). This is exemplified by algorithmic power, whereby online visibility is dependent on algorithms that rank, sort and classify. As these algorithms structure social

actors' interactions with others as members of networked publics (Gillespie 2013), they also structure the interactions of social researchers. Algorithmic processes introduce epistemological challenges, whereby human and non-human actors select and filter information (Schou and Farkas 2016). My research methodology acknowledges how social media algorithms not only mediate but also shape social relations. These algorithms remained largely invisible, to myself as researcher and to the content creators I did research with. Inaccessible, proprietary algorithms shape everyday life (Willson 2017: 140) and social life is, as Iliadis puts it (2018: 221), 'steeped in algorithmic mediation'. Applying this to the ethical-content creators in my study – some of whom were engaged in what Cotter (2019: 895) has described as 'conscious interactions' with algorithms to play a 'visibility game' in the pursuit of influence that resembles a game built around the 'rules' encoded in algorithms – algorithmic mediation has implications for how philosophical beliefs are performed. Bishop (2019), whose study of beauty vloggers on YouTube traces how content creators produce knowledge through 'algorithmic gossip' to manage their online visibility, notes that while the algorithmic 'black box' can be a methodological limitation, it can also act as a 'creative methodological starting point', since YouTube algorithms answer, as well as enact, what should be made visible and to whom. My methodology acknowledges these blind spots in the visibility of ethical content on social media, while using them as an opportunity to ask participants how they modify their ethical messaging according to the algorithmic processes that structure computer-mediated social interaction. This brings a belief perspective to Bucher (2017: 30), whose notion of the 'algorithmic imaginary' suggests that examining how people feel about algorithms is crucial if their social power is to be better understood. Some of my conversations with vegan content creators investigated how they felt about algorithms and how their algorithmic knowledge shaped the ethical messaging of their content creation. This is discussed in *Chapter Eight: Vegan Testimony and the Digital Sensory Encounter*.

In *Witnesses to the Future*, social media are not only employed as a methodological device but also as an epistemological one, whereby the internet is both an object and a method of social enquiry (Marres 2017: 30), while social worlds are entangled with the data they produce (Knox and Nafus 2018: 1). The rise of veganism from niche subculture to mainstream ethical stance has been made

possible to a great extent by social media. Beliefs concerning veganism are being formed, acquired and transmitted entirely in the digital realm on an unprecedented scale. To investigate this phenomenon employing digital ethnographic methods was to experience it as it is experienced by vegans themselves: through digital visual content, digital livestreams and digital discussions. It afforded me a substantive understanding of how beliefs concerning veganism are acquired through the outputs of content creators and their work to create for their audiences a 'connection' to non-human animals (Harding and Day 2021). In commenting about how a significant number of people are not engaged with religion, Beaman (2017: 16-17) suggests that 'a different, immanent framework from which to understand the world is emerging'. Ethical veganism presents a strong example of an ethical framework that builds on current scholarship. Through creating a fieldsite to understand the mediatised aspects of philosophical belief, I created a research space in which vegans discussed how they constructed their realities through their media practices.

3.4 Researcher positionality; ethical and relational concerns

Campbell et al (2017: 22) call for scholars of digital religion 'to cultivate fluency, not just in the nature and reality of the relationship between religion and the digital, but in the wider patterns of emerging outside these contexts in the global social network'. However, what appears to be missing from this call is the relationship not only between non-religion and the digital, but also between the researcher and research participants. An apparent absence from existing studies of digital religion is a consideration of the positionality of the researcher. Cheruvallil-Contractor et al (2016: 186-187) note the assumption that those who research religion are likely to be identified with a religion, thus making researcher positionality and disclosure ethical issues that need to be addressed in research design. These issues, they add, may be of particular concern to the non-religious, who may harbour doubts about 'participating in research that is seen as being essentially about religion'. Wallis (2014: 72) suggests that researcher positionality and disclosure are ethical issues that should be addressed in research design, being of potential concern to non-religious participants who may be reluctant to engage in non-religion research that they may see as being 'really about religion'. Wallis proposes that as non-religion is a relational term that is dependent on the task of defining religion, 'it is

important for researchers to be reflexive not only about the precise nature of the relationship of difference that non-religion has with religion, but also about what they and their participants mean by 'religion'. This view is echoed by Day (2016b), who writes of data as 'part of a broader conversation in which the researcher has played a determining role' and the importance of creating 'a constant state of tension, uncertainty and, ideally, reflexivity in the researcher'. As this relates to the study of non-religion, Day suggests that such reflexivity can 'free researchers from the strictures of preconceived concepts of non-religion'. As described so far in this chapter, reflexivity played an important role in approaching the topic of my research and in refining the direction and aims of the study. My experience of being a non-vegan researcher investigating veganism as a philosophical belief informed my data analysis, particularly in how I came to position myself as someone who saw, but did not witness. As already discussed, reflexivity concerning my ambivalent non-religious identification shaped the research project in its earlier stages. This was reflected in fieldwork, when definitional issues concerning religious and non-religious identification were discussed in interviews, with research participants given an opportunity to articulate their understandings of religion and non-religion. This opportunity also extended to their understandings of belief. Interview participants were asked about whether they considered veganism to be a belief, which enabled them to discuss their veganism alongside other aspects of their identities. This is discussed in more detail in *Chapter Six: Veganism as a Performative Act of Bearing Witness*.

This chapter ends with a discussion regarding the ethical aspects of the research project. One challenge of conducting online research is gaining informed consent and maintaining the ethical principle of respecting the individuals whose data are being used for research (Legewie and Nassauer 2018). As a relatively new research method with unclear standards and guidelines, digital ethnography ethics often remain unclear and ethnographers face numerous ethical dilemmas, particularly in how informed consent can be adapted to online fieldwork and how the anonymity of social media users can be protected (Cera 2023: 1). Much of the data in the following empirical chapters are generated from interviews with participants who had agreed to take part in research and had signed consent forms accordingly. To complement these data, I also constructed an

ethnographic story using data from observing, and reflecting on, watching publicly available vegan content on social media platforms. In some of these stories, I used the real identities of content creators – such as CosmicSkeptic and That Vegan Teacher – because I did not contact them for interview and had no correspondence with them during fieldwork. Conversely, for the content creators that I interviewed, I took care to not identify them through descriptions of their social media content, so that they remained anonymous. In conducting data collection, I also heeded Patterson's (2018: 765) guiding suggestion that the 'seemingly endless data points' of online spaces should not 'become disassociated from the individuals who breathe life into them'. This means that YouTube and Instagram were not approached as a huge repository of 'free' data, but that these observational data from publicly accessible social media platforms, when used, were contextualised by using data from 24 semi-structured interviews.

The YouTube content creators in Harding and Day (2021) were anonymised throughout, although they were given the option to use their YouTube channel name in research outputs. Two participants asked if their real names and YouTube channels could be used. As Guenther (2009: 413-414) argues, naming is powerful and choosing to use names or alter names is something researchers should consider carefully when considering the anonymity of participants. In Guenther's work with feminist activists in eastern Germany, many respondents 'wanted to be heard […] by guaranteeing their confidentiality, I was in effect denying my respondents the right to be heard; in renaming them through the use of pseudonyms, I was denying them the basic right to be who they are'. However, in revealing the real names of participants, care must be taken to not reveal, by association, the identities of those who wish to remain anonymous. Wheeler (2018) notes that while online usernames can provide some level of anonymity for those participants that wish to remain anonymous, they can often contain information that may reveal identifiable information, such as names and locations. Wheeler sets out three main concerns for researchers conducting online ethnography: defining the public and private domain; working out who constitutes a member of a vulnerable group; and the value of anonymity. Using her research on Muslimah2Muslimah, two African-American Muslim YouTube fashion and beauty vloggers, Wheeler argues for taking a

context-specific approach to understand that who is being studied determines 'how privacy and vulnerability are defined' and when making information anonymous is necessary. James and Busher (2009: 14) underline the importance of constructing a means by which participants 'can check and confirm the meaning of their texts/speech acts before they are used outside the conversations of the communities for which they were originally intended'. This is especially important in the contexts of YouTube and Instagram, where digital content is created for an audience and is not necessarily considered by content creators as social research data.

Questions of anonymity were discussed with participants in the main fieldwork period for *Witnesses to the Future*. An issue raised through my pilot fieldwork identifying activist groups on YouTube was that anonymity must be handled carefully. Through watching publicly available discussions on this platform, I discerned the interpersonal connections between content creators, including their disagreements with each other. These disagreements were sometimes aired publicly, for example in the form of response videos. In the consent forms that were used for recruitment, there was an option for respondents to include their real name in the research write-up. While some participants indicated that they were happy to use their real names, I took the decision to anonymise all participants. If one participant in the sample had wished to be known by their real identity, then there remained a risk, though association, of unveiling other participants who wished to remain anonymous. While it was important to give interview participants the option to use their real names in the research output, it was equally important not to reveal the identity of those participants that did not want to be identified. Since some of the interview participants made social media content arguing against the views of other interview participants, I did not wish to perpetuate this conflict through my research. However, the theme of online conflict between vegans became a salient topic for discussion in interviews and is discussed in later empirical chapters. Moreover, because interviews involved the potentially sensitive topics of religion and belief, blanket anonymity for all participants afforded informants a safe space in which to discuss their beliefs without being associated with their online personae.

Finally, a short note on the terminology used in this thesis. Throughout, I generally use the term 'animal' to denote non-human animals. In some instances where appropriate to do so, 'non-human animals' and 'other animals' are employed. While earlier drafts had employed 'non-human animals' throughout, this presented problems when discussing widely understood terms such as 'animal agriculture', 'animal advocacy' and 'animal rights'. Using the prefix of 'non-human' in these terms would have affected the readability of the text. In using the term 'other animals', Peggs (2012: 14) notes the difficult choices that she encountered in its usage, particularly in how 'human' remains the referent and how, similarly to 'non-human', other creatures are linguistically constructed as 'other than us'. I have chosen to use 'animal' but also employ 'non-human animal' or 'other animal' when appropriate to reflect the diversity of terminology that research participants used in interviews. While some participants were careful to emphasise human commonality with other inhabitants of the planet (Nibert 2002: xv) through referring to 'other animals', others simply used the term 'animal'. Their preferences are reflected in the interviews that follow in empirical chapters.

In this chapter, I have described how the aims of this research project were refined through a series of methodological decisions that led to choosing veganism as a case study to investigate the contours of philosophical belief. I have also reflected on my positionality as a researcher and how this shaped my relationships with the vegans I did research with. This is also discussed in more detail in *8.5 The researcher as potential witness*. In employing a form of ethnographic practice that 'follows' (Marcus 1995; Burrell 2009) philosophical belief as a mediatised object, the research attends to a phenomenon that has, as yet, received little attention in the sociology of religion. To this, I add the dimension of how philosophical belief is produced and transmitted within a social media context. In considering how belief is performed within a context of 'deep mediatisation' (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 7), the research bridges the lacuna between non-religion and digital religion scholarship, bringing empirical work on the mediatised aspects of belief to enrich existing literature in both non-religion and digital religion studies. The following chapter adds the framework of witnessing theory. This underpins the understanding of veganism as a performative, affective and relational belief that will be developed in subsequent chapters.

4 The Witness

4.1 From seeing to witnessing

The following chapter uses witnessing theory to establish the figure of the witness in later empirical chapters. In bearing witness to the oppression of animals, vegans produce accounts of suffering and atrocity, which are then communicated to others. Employing Kelly Oliver's (2001; 2004; 2010; 2015) work on witnessing and subjectivity, I show how vegans' testimony has an ethical and political value, demanding that the oppression of animals is not only seen, or merely recognised, but acted upon. Drawing on Oliver's work in the context of other theorists, I propose that ethical obligation is at the core of vegan subjectivity. Witnessing is also employed as a framework in which to consider the truth claims of vegans. While this is discussed in more detail in later chapters, I propose here that vegan testimony draws attention to how human dominance over animals brings into focus the existential uncertainty of living in the Anthropocene. This foregrounds the veracity of vegans' truth claims. Alongside discussion of theory, I also present two pieces of empirical data from fieldwork. These are significant moments in fieldwork that crystallised the decision to employ witnessing theory, including media witnessing theory, in my analysis. Throughout the chapter, I show how witnessing theory's adaptability facilitates an analysis of veganism as a philosophical belief in a number of ways and prepares the ground for the empirical chapters to follow.

In February 2021, just before starting fieldwork, I was driving through Oxfordshire, on the M40 southbound towards London. I cruised in the middle lane past numerous large goods vehicles, occasionally forced into the fast lane when their drivers decided to overtake the vehicle in front, pulling out suddenly and causing temporary bottlenecks in the flow of traffic. As I veered between lanes, I noticed that one of the vehicles I was about to pass was not like the others. It was covered in tarpaulin branded with a company name and I noticed that there were vents on the side of the vehicle, through which the late-afternoon light filtered. As I asked myself why the vehicle had these vents, my question was answered by a sign on the rear that said 'LIVESTOCK'. Behind the vents, there were animals in transit, although I was unable to make out which animals as I needed to keep my focus on the road in front of me. In the space of a few seconds, I passed one, two, then three

trucks, before continuing my journey southbound. Seeing these trucks, and what they contained, unsettled me. Taking a deep breath, I gripped the steering wheel as I continued to keep a focus on the road ahead. Why was the sight of three trucks full of animals being taken to slaughter filling me with unease? Surely, I asked myself, I had no right to feel sadness or empathy for the creatures behind the vents – notwithstanding a brief flirtation with vegetarianism as a teenager, I had eaten animals throughout my life. While my pilot fieldwork had prompted me to consider the ethics of eating animals, I was far from being vegan, or even vegetarian. It also struck me as curious that despite having grown up in south Devon on the fringes of Dartmoor, surrounded by the business of breeding livestock, this was the first time in my life I could recall seeing a truck with vents on the side, crammed with animals being taken to slaughter. Why had it taken me this long to notice? Were these vehicles on the motorway really the first ones that I had seen, or had I seen vehicles such as these many times before and had failed to notice them?

Soon after this incident on the M40, I interviewed a vegan activist called Amanda. She recalled a time when she had been standing on the street with a friend and an empty slaughterhouse truck passed by. It made her freeze, she said, causing her to forget where she was in conversation. She remembered looking at her friend, who asked her what the matter was, and she told him she was trying to remember what she had been talking about, because seeing the truck took her out of the present moment. I told Amanda I had had a similar experience a few weeks before on my motorway drive and that I was struck by how I 'suddenly noticed' the livestock truck and could not recall seeing one before. She said that since becoming vegan, she had come to 'really see the level of animal exploitation happening, how pervasive it is in everything'. She talked about watching TV: 'I'm sure you've noticed this too, when you watch like an hour-long programme or something with commercial breaks, every other one, there's something to do with animal exploitation, every other one.' While she said she was sure I had noticed it as well, it was not something that I had noticed until I had chosen veganism as the object of my study. It was not until fieldwork commenced that I would start to see – to 'really see', like Amanda said – various forms of animal use and exploitation that I had not properly registered before. Even though my fieldsite was virtual, it was still a network of physical

73

and imagined spaces (Burrell 2009: 190) in which what I had seen about animal exploitation online seeped into the everyday. For example, midway through the fieldwork period, walking around my south London neighbourhood, I began to see exploitation of animals where I had not seen it before: garish photos of dead animals on menus in the windows of takeaways, aisles of dead animals in corner shops and caged birds in the high street's 'pet centre'. What I was observing in fieldwork and interviews alerted me to a new way of seeing the world and to recognise the violence committed against animals. However, while I acknowledged the atrocity that my interlocutors alerted me to, I failed to take action upon what I saw. I recognised the alterity of the animals but ultimately, I failed to become responsible to this alterity. Thus, I did not, unlike my interlocutors, bear witness to animals' suffering.

4.2 The era of the witness

Witnessing carries 'weighty baggage', proposes Peters (2001: 708), who draws attention to three of its aspects: law, theology and atrocity. In law, a witness is one with first-hand knowledge who is called to give evidence about an event. In ethical and legal discourses, witnessing operates in an environment of knowledge, responsibility and action (Ristovska 2016: 1034). It also refers to a wider process of establishing and assessing truth in the presence of others (Nevejan and Gill 2012: 1). The figure of the witness has also been shaped by religion, particularly Christianity, where Jesus established himself as 'the witness par excellence' (Hartog 2017: 3-5). Testimonies on disasters and atrocities were produced before the twentieth century – such as memoirs of plague survivors; eyewitness accounts of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake; and documenting of colonial domination since the late eighteenth century – yet it was the burgeoning publication of books authored by combatants during and after World War I that advanced testimonial literature, such as Jean Norton Cru's *Témoins* (*Witnesses*) in 1929, a compilation of 304 war books published in France during and after World War II (Givoni 2016: 99-104). The history of the twentieth century is 'replete with testimonial litanies of human suffering', reports Kurasawa (2007: 23), acknowledging earlier descriptions of the epoch, such as 'the era of the witness' (Wieviorka 1998) and 'the age of testimony' (Felman and Laub 1992).

Witnessing, testimony and trauma are bound to modernity (Ibrahim 2020: 489-490). Krämer and Weigel (2017: xxiv) note that 'the precarious position of the survivor' has led to an international expansion of testimony studies in a variety of contexts such as war crimes in former Yugoslavia (Campbell et al 2014) and victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans (Sarkar and Walker 2010), to name but two.

Testimony and bearing witness have been treated in multifaceted ways across a variety of disciplines. For example, as Chua reports (2021: 111-112), debates about responsibility, truth-telling and accountability have been debated in anthropology since at least the 1980s, such as morally committed anthropology-as-witnessing (Scheper-Hughes 1995) and detached, independent witnessing as activism (Marcus 2005). Since the 1980s, research in these fields has been consolidated under the independent field of testimony studies, its breadth ranging from research on trauma and memory to political and juridical debate in courts and truth commissions (Krämer and Weigel 2017: ix). Contemporary scholarship on witnessing traces back to the Holocaust and its legacy, yet as a theory it is transferrable and adaptable (Richardson and Schankweiler 2020: 239). Witnessing has also had a long history of inspiring social change, with testimonies central to shaping historical records of trauma, injustice and violence (Gillespie 2016: 578). Bearing witness has become what Kurasawa (2007: 53) calls one of the defining practices of the work of global justice, a mode of social action that confronts 'a host of perils constantly threatening to submerge it: silence, incomprehension, indifference, forgetting and repetition'.

During the twentieth century, witnessing developed beyond its original associations with law and religious belief, emerging in response to World War I, the Holocaust and various emergencies in the developing world (Givoni 2014: 123). Atrocity reconfigured witnessing in the twentieth century, notably in the wake of the Holocaust. Linked by poststructuralist thought, the foundation of a new ethical approach was formed. Shoshana Felman, in her contribution to *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992), saw testimony as a performative act.

Jean-François Lyotard (1983) regarded bearing witness as the 'practical expression of the obligation to lay bare what discursive regimes have silenced', while Giorgio Agamben (1999) framed testimony as the ethical 'remnant' of the Holocaust. These perspectives 'liberated moral philosophy and practice from its legal and theological straightjackets' (Givoni 2016: 208-209). Much of twentieth-century continental philosophy can be seen as addressing the demise of humanism, an epistemologically flawed category that collapsed with the atrocities of the century (Deranty 2008: 165). Continental poststructuralist philosophy reflects on the paradoxes of bearing witness, with reference to survivors of the Holocaust and the impossibility of testimony's discursive relationship to truth (Krämer and Weigel 2017: xii). The meaning of the term 'testimony' has been contested: while analytic philosophy considers testimony as a term describing a variety of sources of knowledge – such as eyewitness accounts and media reports – continental philosophy generally reserves the term for what is called bearing witness, the 'unique first-hand attestation of a singular event' (Gelfert 2017: 33). Thus, contemporary philosophy of testimony is divided into two discourses, which focus on either testimony as a source of knowledge or on testimony's ethical and political value (Schmidt 2017: 259).

Lyotard's *The Differend* (1983) was the first systematic attempt to conceptualise a crisis of witnessing and to produce from it a form of ethical witnessing distinct from eyewitnessing and its epistemic constraints (Givoni 2016: 57). Lyotard theorised testimony in terms of an 'inherent impossibility', with testimony being characterised by a constitutive impasse because the ethical obligation of bearing witness 'emerges precisely at the point of the unsayable' (Sumic-Riha 2004: 17-18). Later, Felman and Laub developed the notion of the Holocaust as an 'event without witnesses' in a double sense, in that one cannot bear witness to it from the inside of the event since, as Agamben notes (1999: 35), 'no one can bear witness from the inside of death'; yet it is also impossible to bear witness from the outside, as outsiders were excluded. Felman and Laub's event without witness, reports Bernstein (2004: 6), shifted witnessing 'into an aporia', which Agamben later deepened through the figures of *Muselmann* prisoners, the 'absolutely unwitnessable, invisible arc of biopower' (Agamben 1999: 156). In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive,* Agamben addresses the role of

bearing witness in revitalising ethics, conceiving of witnessing as a moral ontology no longer bonded to juridical models (Givoni 2016: 69), a critical task that bears witness to the past and potential horror of reality, as well as a descriptive task of identifying the inhuman in the human (Deranty 2008: 167). Agamben's work is concerned with the exercising of governmental power, presenting ethics as the task of bearing witness to those who have suffered at the hands of the exercise of sovereign power (Murray 2010: 1). In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben employs Latin terms that characterise the status of the witness – *testis* as a witness as a third party in a trial between two parties; *superstes* as someone who has experienced something and who can tell others about it; and *auctor* as a witness of a pre-existing matter (such as a fact) whose reality must be guaranteed – thus implying a duality and the existence of an internal gap (Sumic-Riha 2004: 17). What Agamben's work on testimony shares with Lyotard, and Felman and Laub, is a conception of witnessing as an ethical gesture, a performative act that did not just depart from scientific objectivity but instead debunked it (Givoni 2014: 136).

4.3 Witnessing: subjectivity and truth

In *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Kelly Oliver outlines (2001: 3-6) that since World War II, attention has turned from the subject and their agency to those who are marginalised, oppressed, enslaved and tortured. While she acknowledges her own thinking is 'indebted' to poststructuralist theories, she challenges 'the Hegelian notion that subjectivity is the result of hostile conflict', citing Honneth's struggle for recognition, as well as 'notions of subjectivity based on a logic of exclusion', such as Judith Butler's foreclosed object of desire or Julia Kristeva's abject (see Kristeva 1992; Honneth 1996; Butler 1997). Oliver concerns herself with the subjectivity of those that are othered and asks if a theory of subjectivity can be developed from 'the position of those othered within dominant culture'. She employs (2001: 85) Felman and Laub's analysis of Holocaust testimonies, developed through the work of Butler and Kristeva, to move beyond theories of identity based on recognition and towards a theory of subjectivity in which oppression is seen beyond recognition.

Oliver's argument is developed by an analysis of the recognition model of subjectivity in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), which she contends (2001: 23) 'problematises the connection between recognition and identity' and employs to develop her arguments in rejecting recognition as the basis for identity. This argument is further refined (2001: 44) in a critique of Charles Taylor, whose (1994) theory about recognition, argues Oliver, is based in 'intellect rather than affect'. Oliver (2001: 61-62) then turns to Butler, who she says 'believes that recognition is essential to subjectivity', a theory that 'continues to privilege the subject and to put the subject in an antagonistic relation with its others' and 'builds oppression and abuse into the foundation of subjectivity'. While Oliver rejects Butler's conclusion that loss and foreclosure are necessary for the formation of identity, she suggests that positive interpersonal affect – an opening-up – creates a subject, rather than subordination and foreclosure. Oliver (2001: 71) also addresses Kristeva's (1995) work on the imagination, which Kristeva associates with the ability to represent experience; Oliver modifies this to contend that imagination is 'nourished through relations with others'. Elsewhere (2004: 79-85), Oliver critiques Butler and Kristeva's focus on misrecognition, namely how identity and one's sense of oneself as a subject 'come from abjecting or excluding otherness'. Instead, Oliver's model of subjectivity bases itself on the 'address-response structure of witnessing in its double sense', a subjectivity that addresses oneself to others, while also carrying the ability to respond to others 'rather than close off their response'. This is described by Oliver as a 'Levinasian move' that makes the subject responsible for their own actions, as well as others' responses to them. Oliver later develops her argument (2015: 475) to propose that witnessing, grounded in response ethics, supplements recognition models of political and ethical subjectivity, moving beyond recognition 'to the affective and imaginative dimensions of experience'.

Oliver contends (2010: 268-275) that rather than consider the ways in which non-human animals are like humans, there is a need to develop an ethics that extends obligations to those 'who are not like us […] an ethics based on sameness is not enough'. Employing Derrida's (2008) pointing to the sovereign subject of Western philosophy's 'I can', Oliver highlights the impossibility of Western attempts to uphold the categories of human and animal, which gives rise to other

dichotomies, 'in the name of which we torture and murder each other, whether it is man-woman, white-black, citizen-foreigner, pure-impure, righteous-infidel'. Witnessing can be autobiographical: the Cartesian 'I am' objectively stages the animal to exist as a theoretical spectacle and exists for the human to say I am, because I see the animal (Dave 2014: 441, drawing on Derrida 2008). Derrida (2008: 82) calls the witnessed animal the 'spectacle for a specular subject'. That specular subject becomes the subject he or she is in the act of seeing, but not through the act of being reflected back in the animal's gaze. This is the Levinasian animal, the one that does not have a face capable of compelling a relationship of ethical obligation (Levinas 2004; Calarco 2008, 55-78).

Levinas's philosophical response to the Holocaust has been significant, particularly the importance of the ethical obligation towards others (Murray 2010: 2). Ethics, for Levinas, entails a responsibility towards the other person, whose face is the surface of the other's alterity and introduces an infinite responsibility towards the other: 'The face is signification […] The face is meaning by itself' (Levinas 1985: 86-87). Hallas (2009: 21) describes Levinas's philosophy as 'the ethical relation at the heart of the encounter between subject and other' (see Levinas 1989), where 'subjectivity is formed in the asymmetrical encounter with the other' and 'the ethical self is formed in being for the other […] to encounter the other is to encounter the 'face' of the other'. In drawing on Levinas, notes Jones (2016: 141), Oliver has developed a robust and relational view of human subjectivity in which it is impossible to have a sense of identity other than one's relations with others. Stumm (2014: 765-767) suggests that the concept of recognition 'reveals a fraught and tenuous relationship with ethical responsibility' and that continental thinkers disagree about how the two are connected, with Levinas (1991) depicting recognition and responsibility as being at odds, instead proposing that 'subjectivity be reconceived in ethical terms rather than antagonistic or ontological terms, as subjectivity formed in relationships 'for others' rather than through others in relation to oneself'. In contrast, Ricoeur (2005) thinks of recognition as being conscious of one's relationship to others. These contradictions, notes Stumm, see Oliver abandoning the notion of recognition for the more 'ethically responsible' notion of witnessing, interpreted by Stumm as a 'model of subjectivity that is inherently responsible to alterity'

through its relationality with others. One of Oliver's arguments in *Witnessing* (2001: 3-7) is to grapple with what she sees as a dichotomy between subject and other, or subject and object, which she contends is 'a result of the pathology of oppression'. To see other people as the other or object, she argues, enables 'the dehumanisation inherent in oppression and domination'. She elaborates that subjectivity results from the process of witnessing and is founded on 'the ability to respond to, and address, others'. Subjectivity, for Oliver, carries an inherent responsibility with a double sense: the possibility of response – 'response-ability' – as well as an ethical obligation to respond and enable response-ability from others (Oliver 2001: 15-16). At the core of subjectivity, then, is ethical obligation.

In addition to this double sense of subjectivity, Oliver (2001: 16) locates another important double meaning: witnessing has both juridical connotations (seeing with one's own eyes) and religious connotations (testifying to that which cannot be seen). She describes witnessing as:

> '[…] the action of bearing witness or giving testimony, the fact of being present and observing something, from *witness* which is defined as to bear witness, to testify, to give evidence, to be a spectator or auditor of something, to be present as an observer, to see with one's own eyes (OED, 3904). It is important to note that witnessing has both the juridical connotations of seeing with one's own eyes and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, or *bearing witness*. It is this double meaning that makes *witnessing* such a powerful alternative to *recognition* in formulating identity and ethical relations.' (Oliver 2001: 31, author's italics)

This double meaning, argues Oliver, presents an alternative to recognition, since it reconceives subjectivity and ethical relations. As an example, Felman and Laub (1992) discuss the validity of the

eyewitness testimony of a Holocaust survivor who 'recalled' the blowing up of four chimneys during the Jewish uprising at Auschwitz, when in 'reality' it was one chimney:

> 'She saw four chimneys blowing up in Auschwitz […] she came to testify to the unbelievability, precisely, of what she had eyewitnessed – this bursting open of the very frame of Auschwitz. The historians testifying to the fact that only one chimney was blown up in Auschwitz […] does not break the frame.' (Felman and Laub 1992: 61-63)

Oliver employs this story to illustrate the idea of a truth beyond recognition, 'the truth of witnessing to what cannot be seen' (2004: 82). While the survivor testifies incorrectly as an eyewitness to this event, she bears witness, says Oliver (2001: 16), 'to something that in itself cannot be seen […] the conditions of possibility of Jewish resistance and survival'. Oliver explains that the survivor's position as a subject is linked to her historical and social circumstances: as a Jew, as a prisoner in a concentration camp and as a woman in the mid-twentieth century. Therefore, evaluation of her testimony does not only consider the accuracy of her testimony, but also her sociohistorical subject position. What the survivor bears witness to is not the number of chimneys that blew up on that day but, rather, bears witness to Jewish resistance, what Jones (2016: 141) describes as 'the truth of resistance in the face of dehumanisation'.

The beginning of this chapter opened with an account of how, over the course of my fieldwork, I recognised the oppression of animals but did not take action upon what I saw. Since I did not testify to what I had seen, I did not bear witness. This contrasted with my interlocutors, who transformed their recognition of animal suffering into ethical obligation as they bore witness to the oppression of animals. As will be shown in the following empirical chapters, I position vegans as carrying a significant responsibility towards alterity. When I encountered Kelly Oliver's work towards the end of

my fieldwork period, witnessing's double meaning, both juridical and religiously inflected, immediately spoke to two aspects of my research project. Firstly, the research is partly a response to a 2020 legal judgement in Great Britain that recognises ethical veganism as a protected characteristic (*Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports*); secondly, the project employs philosophical belief as a methodology for investigating a small facet of what it may mean to be non-religious. Non-religion, while being related to religion, can also be distinct from it (Lee 2015b: 32). Similarly, witnessing is related to religion but is not always considered to be religious. Moreover, as I will elaborate in *Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness* and *Chapter Six: Veganism as a Performative Act of Bearing Witness*, witnessing's juridical and religious double meanings also make the concept highly relevant to analysing veganism as a philosophical belief, particularly in the way that vegans may produce a 'vegan truth' that witnesses what cannot be seen (Oliver 2004: 82). Rather than assessing the veracity of vegans' truth claims, what is important in vegan testimony is in how it captures the existential uncertainty of the future and indicates that an unlearning of human superiority is necessary to avert environmental collapse. As they bear witness, vegans' testimony occurs in what Hallas describes (2009: 10) as a framework of relationality that produces its truth. Vegan testimony, rather than having epistemic autonomy in which knowledge is reduced to evidence and verifiability, is incarnated as knowledge without proof (Krämer and Weigel 2017: xv). In producing an affective and relational testimony that performatively draws attention to the entanglement of human and non-human bodies, and in calling on other humans to be ethically responsible to the non-human animal other, vegans bear witness not only to the oppression of animals but also to the current moment of the Anthropocene, in which human beings face responsibility for the unfolding catastrophe of climate change. This predicament raises the stakes for witnessing and the production of testimony, meaning that taking responsibility for the scale of this ecological crisis means to be fundamentally affective (Richardson 2020: 340).

So far in this chapter, I have presented an account of how witnessing theory – particularly Kelly Oliver's work on subjectivity and ethical responsibility – has been central to the analysis of my data. Another important development of witnessing theory has been in its application to media analysis.

Since my thesis is concerned with how veganism as a philosophical belief is shaped by media practices, media witnessing theory has been an important theoretical frame to position the vegan as witness. I now move to the second use of empirical data in this chapter to introduce media witnessing theory and explain how it will be used in subsequent chapters.

4.4 Media witnessing

This chapter opened with a description of noticing animals being driven to slaughter as I travelled on a motorway just before I commenced fieldwork. Later, wishing to follow this object (Marcus 1995) and wanting to know what happens when animals arrive at a slaughterhouse, I watched animal-rights activists' slaughterhouse vigil videos on YouTube. One such video, filmed outside a Welsh abattoir in 2019, is included here to consider how the witnessing of animals' suffering and death is produced by vegans as a media event. It also introduces another theme that forms a principal argument in this thesis: that affect is central to the performativity of vegan belief. Following this, I present a discussion of media witnessing theory and explain its relevance to my analysis.

The video of the Welsh abattoir vigil commenced with a few seconds of scene-setting, including shots of the retail unit where produce from the abattoir was sold. An activist had draped a black flag outside the shop, which depicted a human fist alongside an animal's paw, so that it looked as though the human and the animal were united in solidarity. An activist stood on the terraced street outside the entrance to the abattoir and a young girl stood next to him. The girl was smiling and holding a homemade banner reading 'stop the murdering, suffering and torture'. The camera then hovered outside a functional-looking building with black zinc iron cladding, metal doors and no windows. The camera swung round to the left and showed the yard of the slaughterhouse. Behind a series of metal gates, which appeared to be constructed to guide animals into the slaughterhouse, sat the row of terraced houses where the video had begun. I found the terraced houses as striking as the sight of the metal gates, since I had previously assumed that slaughterhouses would not be situated so close to dense residential areas. This prompted an imagining on my part of what the residents could see

from their back windows every day, straight into the facility and close enough to see the livestock moving around, as if they were in their back gardens – the pigs and sheep who were arriving in trailers and leaving in plastic packaging, the noises and smells of those creatures and their deaths. Curious to know where the slaughterhouse was located, I looked up some online reviews of the shop, which were glowing in their praise: 'Lovely meat […] Top-dollar lads'. A *Wales Online* story from 2009 described how the family-run firm's throughput had trebled, a business in which farmers 'take advantage of a kill-and-cut service for farm shops and farmers' markets'. The abattoir had been on the site for 120 years, according to the story, starting with 'a guy who had three lambs and wanted them cut up for the freezer'.

In the video, an activist opened a large bin with a sticker reading 'category 3 material not fit for human consumption'. He was followed by one of the abattoir's workers, who threw two fresh lamb's heads in the bin. There were other lambs' heads in this bin. One of them still had its eyes open and its dead gaze came up to meet the lens of the activist's camera. 'Can you leave, please?' asked the abattoir worker. 'I've asked you to leave. You've walked past clear signs and I want you to leave the site.' Another activist filmed him on their smartphone. The abattoir worker made his request again, holding out his arm. 'Now leave the site.' An activist asked the worker: 'Do you think we need to kill these animals to survive or be healthy?'. A different activist enquired, in a probing manner akin to a journalist doorstepping a politician: 'How do you justify unnecessary killing, sir?'. The worker asked him to leave, adding, 'you don't have to call me sir'. Activists filmed him nevertheless, as he walked through the site, looking somewhat resigned to having his every move filmed by activists. One of the activists narrated the actions of the worker, acting as commentator for the eventual viewer of the video. 'This man cannot justify unnecessary killing. He is aggressive. He makes a livelihood killing defenceless, innocent, vulnerable infants.'

In the next scene, at the gate of the slaughterhouse, a woman stood with a placard reading: 'Dogs and cats killed here.' This, of course, did not reflect the reality of which animals were being killed in

the slaughterhouse, but the slogan was performative in that it drew attention to what the activists regarded as speciesism – treating one species as morally more important than other species, what Noske (1997: 183) describes as the 'differences in treatment of individual beings on the grounds of their belonging to different biological categories'. Alongside the image of the woman holding the placard was another frame, that of a pig staring out from inside a livestock truck. 'What is the difference between a dog and a pig?' asked a caption. 'It's only our perception.' The next image was of the contents of the waste bin: a pile of dead lambs' heads, their faces covered in blood and their eyes still open.

A livestock truck arrived. An activist's camera got up close to the vents, to capture on video a small group of pigs as they were driven into the abattoir. After this, the vigil started to turn ugly, with arguments between activists and agricultural workers. One farmer, leaving the abattoir after having dropped off animals to be killed, told the activists: 'I do not reinforce [sic] my beliefs on any of you.' An activist replied: 'You send them to kill.' The farmer answered back: 'So?' As she drove away, she leaned out of her window to address the activists, saying: 'You do know plants are supposed to be sentient beings, yeah?'. She drove away, an empty trailer attached to her vehicle. After this, another vehicle arrived. Attached to the vehicle was a trailer, in which two pigs stood in hay. As the vehicle entered the slaughterhouse grounds, an activist waved a black flag. By this time, there was a police presence at the abattoir. The activists swooped upon the trailer that had just arrived, brandishing smartphones to capture the last hours of the two pigs. 'Six months old,' one activist said. 'Brutalised for bacon.' Another trailer arrived, which prompted another digital testimony through multiple smartphones. The pigs inside squinted their eyes at the sunlight streaming through the vent. 'We're just witnessing the last moments of these animals now,' said an activist. 'For people to see, so they can recognise what's going on.' Another activist talked to the pigs. 'I'm so sorry,' she said to them, reaching her hand into the trailer to tenderly touch a pig's back. The video ended with an activist remonstrating with a bystander, a middle-aged man walking his dog past the slaughterhouse. 'You're off your heads,' said the man. 'We've [humans] got canine teeth. Get a job. You need to get a job. And what am I supposed to eat, then? If we stop eating meat, there won't be any fucking land.'

The scenes from the Welsh abattoir speak to a theme that will run through subsequent chapters: the affective performativity of vegan belief. The video's use of stark footage – the heads of dead sheep, the young pigs huddling on a trailer unaware of their impending deaths – suggests that its producers seek to provoke a charge of affect from the eventual viewer. The activists' choice of words – such as 'infant' instead of lamb or piglet – are performative utterances that seek to engineer an uptake of the vegan message from those that later watch the video. This is discussed further in *Chapter Six: Veganism as a Performative Act of Bearing Witness*, where it will also be argued that, as in the abattoir vigil video, vegan beliefs are partly shaped in an arena of conflict with non-vegans. While the YouTube video of the Welsh abattoir shows vegans labouring to transmit their testimonial messages in the context of hostility, it also illustrates the activists' keen awareness that they are both acting as witnesses and delivering testimony through their social media content. In this sense, the vigil is also an example of a media event that acts as a vehicle for vegan testimony, one of several media events that are presented throughout this thesis.

In mediating and representing the death of the animals they film, the activists in the Welsh abattoir video create a firsthand act of media witnessing, what Frosh and Pinchevski (2014: 594) describe as witnessing that is performed 'in, by and through the media'. Frosh (2006: 265) notes that in most traditional accounts, a witness is physically present at an event and reports it to those who are absent; hence, media audiences receive someone else's testimony. In critiquing these accounts, Frosh argues that contemporary witnessing has now become a 'general mode of receptivity' to media reports about 'distant others'. He illustrates this by reference to a 2002 Channel 4 documentary where a journalist says, from the inside of a car travelling through the West Bank, 'we are driving through a war zone'. This, suggests Frosh, establishes presence as 'discursively created' in space (the war zone) and time (the present tense). This transmits a direct experience about an event to those who are not there physically. This discursively created presence can also be usefully applied to think about the abattoir vigil described above. Rather than humans being distant others, activists draw attention to how certain species of non-human animals are rendered distant by their concealment, shielded behind vents of trailers as they are taken to be killed for human consumption.

While the abattoir is not a war zone, it is framed by activists as a site of what they tell the viewer is 'murdering, suffering and torture'. When one of the activists states, in a factual tone, that 'we're just witnessing the last moments of these animals now', they are relating their direct experience of the event to their viewers on YouTube, who are not at the abattoir physically, but nevertheless are invited to witness for themselves the lives – and deaths – of the animals that arrive there.

Witnessing has been mediated for centuries through storytelling, yet digital technology now facilitates this storytelling at speed and scale (Nevejan and Gill 2012: 1). While witnessing is not a new phenomenon, and has long predated electronic media through legal, religious and philosophical traditions, the advent of these media has augmented and transformed what it means to witness (Frosh 2006: 266). The practice of bearing witness is executed through communicative channels – such as films, television and electronic media – to speak out against suffering, cultivate empathy to replace indifference and remember events that might otherwise be forgotten (Kurasawa 2009: 92-97). As a theoretical concept, witnessing has been employed in media literature since John Ellis (2000) and John Durham Peters (2001) used the theory to ask epistemological questions about the representation of reality; ever since, it has been developed to judge the ethical practice of producers and audiences (Ong 2014: 185). The use of witnessing in media studies is underpinned by Peters' (2001: 707-708) conception of witnessing – an 'intricately tangled practice' – as fundamental to communication. Ellis's *Seeing Things* (2000: 32) singles out television as a technology that symbolises the salience of the witness, and of witnessing, through its 'liveness' and the way it presents violence and trauma to a mass audience (Ibrahim 2020: 491-492). However, Peters' account of witnessing does not only concern seeing or watching events but also involves participation with events that are unfolding on the screen. Peters (2001: 707-709) argues that witnessing raises questions about 'truth and experience, presence and absence, death and pain, seeing and saying'. In contrast with Oliver's double meaning of witnessing, discussed earlier in this chapter – specifically its juridical connotations of seeing with one's own eyes and religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen – Peters locates the double aspect of witnessing as a verb. It is a sensory experience that engages the eyes and ears, and a discursive

act that communicates one's experience to an audience that was not present at an event and are called upon to make a judgment about the event. Peters contends that distant viewing is not as effective as first-hand viewing, arguing that the act of being present at the event matters. For example, Peters' (2001: 711) concept of a veracity gap is an audience's experience of their distance in space and time from what is being broadcast on television, a disconnect between the audience and distant suffering. However, it can be argued that presence should not be regarded as a less effective form of witnessing. For example, Allissa Richardson (2020: 5-6) critiques Peters' assertion that recording is the weakest form of witnessing, countering that this argument is not supported by the thousands of Black Lives Matter protesters who were not present first-hand at Michael Brown's death in 2014, but still felt they had seen it as if they were there at the event.

Peters' (2001: 707-708) description of witnessing as raising questions of truth, experience, death and pain offers some level of utility to the analysis of vegans' media practices presented in this thesis. For example, vegans bear witness to, and then circulate to others, the suffering and death of animals through digital media content, as well as engage in discourses of truth relating to normative consumption of animals (discussed in more depth in the next two chapters). Witnessing can also be considered as a performative, discursive act in which the person who witnesses possesses and produces knowledge for an audience that was not present at the event (Peters 2001: 709). However, Peters' emphasis on the importance of witnesses being present at the event is less relevant to the animal-rights content I engaged with during fieldwork. For myself as researcher, the act of watching second-hand accounts of atrocity committed against animals, circulated by vegan activists, was no less powerful than if I had been present at these events myself. One can watch the death, or suffering, of animals in media accounts without being present at the event and it remains nonetheless a powerful sensory, affective experience. In depicting the vulnerability of animals through the circulation of second-hand accounts on social media, vegans' media practices carry the power to potentially engage co-witnesses and potential new vegan subjects. Ibrahim argues (2020: 495) that through broadcasting and digital platforms, trauma is circulated and consumed through 'technologies of trauma', producing subjects of witnessing and the vulnerability of being human. Vegan activist

content creators extend the circulation of trauma to encompass the vulnerability of animals and how humans are implicated in their oppression.

Since Peters, witnessing has become a core analytical concern in media scholarship. This has developed into a body of literature about witnessing that configures relations between events, producers, consumers, content and technologies (Gray 2019: 971-972). Throughout this thesis, I argue that vegan testimonies, such as the work of activist content creators, are affective and sensory encounters that endeavour to create potential co-witnesses by inviting and mobilising the moral engagement of others. This draws on perspectives from media witnessing theory, such as Chouliaraki's (2015: 1362) conception of digital witnessing, explained as the 'moral engagement with distant suffering through mobile media, by means of recording, uploading and sharing'. Mortensen (2015: 1393-1394), alternatively, proposes the term 'connective witnessing', which involves political participation ('connective action') in the form of recording and sharing of visual documentation, subsequently producing and distributing 'eyewitness images on a large scale'. As witness accounts have been transformed by digital technologies that enable witnesses to produce and share their own testimonies, Mortensen suggests this departs from the two distinct phases of 'private experience' and 'public statement' that Peters described in 'the passive one of seeing and the active one of saying' (2001: 709), as events are recorded on location as they play out. Thus, connective witnessing concerns the position of the individual witness and the understanding of those that are addressed by the witness (Mortensen 2015: 1393-1394).

In a critique of how witnessing has been employed in media scholarship, Ong (2014: 186) suggests that while media witnessing literature attempts to distinguish between passive and active forms of witnessing, these forms of witnessing are often collapsed or interchanged in literature, such as Peters' (2001: 709) typologies between 'eyewitness' and the person who 'bears witness'. Ong adds that there is a lack of consensus in media scholarship about whether witnessing means the audience's passive spectatorship or voyeurism; a more active response to suffering through media

events; or textual strategies that invite a response from an audience. Tait's (2011: 1220-1221) emphasis on bearing witness, and the way in which bearing witness involves a moral engagement with suffering, is particularly relevant to the empirical work that follows in this thesis. Tait argues for a strict analytical distinction between 'witnessing' and 'bearing witness', with bearing witness referring only to active, moral engagements with suffering. Tait notes a lack of clarity among media studies scholars in the conflation of eyewitnessing and bearing witness, proposing instead that a distinction must be made 'to elucidate the ways practices of bearing witness exceed seeing'. Following Zelizer (1998), who suggests that assuming responsibility is central to the act of bearing witness, Tait separates the conflated terms of 'witnessing' and 'bearing witness' to propose that the ontology of bearing witness 'exceeds seeing, and this excess lies in what it means to perform responsibility'. This makes a distinction between objective journalistic reporting, which involves detachment, and bearing witness, which 'translates affect into discourse in order to perform a response to trauma and elicit an affective response that moralises the audience's future action'. In this critical intervention, notes Ristovska (2016: 1036-1037), Tait echoes post-Holocaust trauma scholarship and regards testimony as central to the act of bearing witness, 'which implies the necessity of response'.

Throughout the following chapters, in answering my central research questions of how veganism as a philosophical belief is acquired, and to what extent this belief is shaped by one's interactions with social media, the multifaceted adaptability of witnessing theory – including media witnessing – serves as a productive frame in which to analyse data and to reflect on my positionality as a researcher in relation to my topic of study. The thesis also brings a philosophical belief aspect to emerging scholarship that explores witnessing and animals. A recurring methodological approach in studies of veganism is researchers' first-hand testimonies of farmed animals (Sexton et al 2022: 609), such as livestock auctions (Gillespie 2018) and slaughterhouses (Lockwood 2018), which attend to the affective responses of both the researcher-as-witness as well as the animals themselves. In her multispecies ethnographic work, Gillespie (2016) employs an affect theory frame to reflect on how non-human agents can be witnessed. She argues that more attention should be given to witnessing

that involves other-than-human lives and foregrounds the role of emotion in witnessing practices. While there has been growing academic interest about witnessing in recent decades, more recent research has included how humans can bear witness to the suffering of animals and the violence committed against them; thus, witnessing empathises with the victims of this violence and seeks to tell their stories (Hamilton 2018: 193-201). Such witnessing is important, argues Gillespie (2016: 572-574) – who explores the embodied experiences of cows raised for dairy – since bearing witness to animals' emotional worlds helps humans to understand 'the violence of commodification and the political dimensions of witnessing the suffering of an Other', whereby grief and other emotions are mobilised into political action. The emotion of witnessing is also entangled with information, notes Rosenfeld (2021: 4), drawing on Ahmed's (2004b, 2017) observations about how witnessing can help to expose and dismantle hierarchies, if not fully eradicate them. She adds that witnessing the lives of non-human animals can counteract the erasure of hierarchies 'such as those that enable animal commodification, suffering and death'. In the context of my research study, vegan and animal-rights content online can be understood as a form of 'digital witnessing' (Chouliaraki 2015), a moral engagement with suffering. While witnessing, an 'explicitly political act', usually turns its attention to the atrocities humans commit against other humans, humans can also bear witness 'to the violence committed against other-than-human animals' (Hamilton 2018: 193-194).

This chapter has established witnessing theory to frame the empirical data that is presented in the following chapters. In *Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness*, I will show how informants employ what I call witnessing narratives, using metaphors to retrospectively make sense of becoming vegan. In *Chapter Six: Veganism as a Performative Act of Bearing Witness*, I explore how vegans' testimony is transmitted to others, a process of establishing a vegan truth and then performatively communicating this truth to others. The affective and imaginative aspects of testimony are explored in *Chapter Seven: Veganism as a Practice of Affective Witnessing*, which then develops (*Chapter Eight: Vegan Testimony and the Digital Sensory Encounter*) into an analysis that shows how affect is central to vegan witnessing and that affective and sensory expression is crucial to vegan digital testimony. Following this, the final empirical chapter proposes that vegans, as witnesses, not only

undergo a personal transformation but also performatively transmit the potential of transformation to others, by conveying affective promise about the future.

5 Becoming a Witness

5.1 Witnessing narratives

Having established the figure of the vegan witness in the last chapter, this chapter presents research participants' stories of becoming vegan, which I call witnessing narratives. In these narratives, participants use connective metaphors to describe their paths towards becoming vegan. They are grouped into two types: witnessing narratives and awakening narratives. In the witnessing narratives, participants give accounts of how they became vegan using metaphors that suggest a slow process of realisation about animal oppression, such as 'joining the dots' and 'putting the puzzle together'. This eventually culminates in a final point of realisation at which the vegan narrator makes the decision to stop consuming animals. In the second type of narrative, participants articulate their stories of becoming vegan in terms that more explicitly suggest an awakening, in which veganism affords the discovery of a new reality. This is sometimes illustrated through the metaphor of a matrix, referencing the 1999 film *The Matrix*, which deals with questions of illusion and reality. Eventually, vegans' discovery of a new reality develops into the discovery of a vegan truth, which is discussed further in *Chapter Six: Veganism as a Performative Act of Bearing Witness*.

My interviews in fieldwork would start by asking participants to tell me the story of how they became vegan and to describe what they had seen, or experienced, that prompted such a significant shift in their lives. What many of these stories shared was how vegans experienced a long period of learning about the oppression of animals through a process of making connections. Eventually, this culminated in a moment of realisation, after which individuals decided to take action upon what they had learned over time and make the decision to stop their use and consumption of animals. In these witnessing narratives, vegans recalled the symbolic moments in their lives that led to their growing awareness of the oppression of animals, before locating one more crucial moment of transformation that propelled them towards the action of becoming vegan. The six stories that follow in this first section see vegans using connective metaphors that lead them to this final point of action.

Talking to Thea, a Greek animal-rights activist, I asked her if she could pinpoint the moment when she made the decision to become a vegan. At first, she said 'not really', but then remembered the time before she was vegetarian and had decided one year not to eat lamb at Easter. Speaking of this decision, she wondered if, in retrospect, it was a subconscious choice that later caused her to become a vegan. Prior to becoming a vegan, Thea said that she had always considered herself to be an animal lover. For example, she was concerned about the high population of stray cats and dogs in her country, one of the largest in the world (Smith 2021a). However, she had never considered veganism, or even vegetarianism, 'because it was never a big thing here in Greece'. Yet, at some point, participating in the Greek cultural practice of roasting a whole lamb on a spit at Easter became difficult for Thea. She then chose not to participate, while at the same time did not doubt 'the fact we need to eat animals'. Following this decision, she saw something that made a profound impact on her. She had been reading about the Yulin Dog Meat Festival in China, where festivalgoers eat dog meat and lychees. This made her feel 'really angry about the whole torturing and killing of dogs and cats'. She told a family friend about what she had read. The friend, who was not vegetarian or vegan, asked Thea why she should find that so upsetting. She told Thea: 'We do the exact same thing to lambs and cows and goats.' Recounting these words, Thea said: 'It was like I suddenly woke up. I realised that […] there is no difference, in any way that matters, between these species.' The family friend's comment about the Yulin Dog Meat Festival had formed a connection between species, what Thea called the 'one most important piece of the past' in her slow journey towards becoming a vegan.

Thea did not think that there was one single event that led people to becoming vegan, citing an animal-rights theorist: 'Tom Regan says that we are all muddlers, and we muddle along, and one day we look at the meal and we see an animal rights activist.' She said that while some people could, for instance, watch the slaughter of an animal and instantly become vegan, she thought that for most people, becoming vegan was a slower process that progressed through experiencing several events before recognising the rights of animals. In a 2007 interview (The Vegan Society 2017), Regan elaborated on a point from his 2005 book *Empty Cages* concerning the acquisition of what he called

'animal consciousness', the 'ability to enter into the mystery of the interior lives of animals'. He proposed there are three groups: DaVincians, Damascans and Muddlers. DaVincians are those who, like Leonardo Da Vinci, have a compassion for non-human animals from an early age, while the lives of Damascans are changed 'radically' and 'dramatically' because of something they experience in a 'Damascene moment'. Damascans, said Regan, 'in the blink of an eye […] are born into animal rights advocacy'. Finally, there are those that Regan called 'Muddlers', who he described in the interview thus:

> '[…] unlike Damascans, there is no single event in their life that changes who they are […] Muddlers, well, they just muddle along, asking one question, then another, learning this, then that; asking for reasons for why they should change; needing to be convinced. Change is a drawn-out process for them, a journey. But if they keep at it, a day dawns when they look in a mirror and, much to their surprise, they see an Animal Rights Advocate looking back at them.'

In Thea's 'muddling' towards veganism prior to her friend's comment about the Yulin Dog Meat Festival, she was, in her words, 'trying to find excuses' to justify her dairy and egg consumption. For example, she described visiting a dairy shop and asking the staff, 'is this cheese coming from happy cows?'. She commented: 'I'm laughing right now because it was like, so naïve from my part, but this was my effort to maintain some degree of my old habit.' She started looking online for more information about veganism. 'I remember I said, OK, this is it, no animal products ever again, you're going vegan.' Becoming a vegan, which she later described in the interview as an identity that 'defines me more than anything else', had not been a quick process. Thea's decision to become vegan involved slowly making realisations over several years as she learned about, and considered her feelings towards, the use of animals for the benefit of humans. While Thea sees what takes place at the Yulin Dog Meat Festival through what she reads, and feels outrage, it is the words of the family friend – connecting dogs and cats with lambs, cows and goats – that cements this incident as a

witnessing, a form of response ethics that prompts a responsibility to act (Oliver 2015: 490), here articulated by Thea as the moment of when she 'woke up'.

Other participants in this study used similar retrospective accounts to recall moments in their lives that contributed to their growing awareness of animal use, then locating a significant moment in which they took action to become vegan. In relating her story of becoming vegan, activist Chloe said that two documentaries had been particularly important: *Earthlings* and then, some years later, *Dominion*. Watching *Earthlings* as an undergraduate, Chloe – who, like Thea, was Greek – said she considered herself an animal lover, but only a lover of certain animals, such as stray dogs and cats. 'I was not able to connect the dots,' she said. At this time, she regarded cows as beef and pigs as pork, as animals that were bred for human consumption. After watching *Earthlings* – a 2005 documentary film described by its makers as being about 'humankind's total dependence on animals for economic purposes' – Chloe became vegetarian. She continued to consume dairy and eggs, while knowing 'in the back of my head' that she was still causing harm through these consumption practices. Chloe remained vegetarian for seven years, until she watched *Dominion.* This documentary, in the words of its creators, exposes 'the dark underbelly of modern animal agriculture' using drones and hidden cameras. 'And then that was it,' said Chloe. She threw 'everything I had' in the bin – meaning animal products – and from that point 'there was no coming back'. A month after discarding the animal-derived products at home and becoming vegan, she got involved in activism: entering farms, street activism and going to vigils where, as she said, 'you bear witness of animals'. Veganism, in her words, became, an 'ideology' that did not 'inflict use and abuse of animals'. She added that having made the decision to become vegan, arrived at over many years of 'connecting the dots […] I would never be able to go back to the previous way I was living'. While, like Thea, Chloe had for years regarded herself as someone concerned about animals, and had spent several years as a vegetarian in what she called an 'avoidance state' about dairy and egg production, it was the stark footage of *Dominion* that transformed the connections she had made into a final point of action from which she felt there could be no return.

Matthew described his path towards veganism in terms of forming connections. He did not become vegan until his twenties, but when he was younger, his elder sister had encountered animal-rights literature at the age of 12 that he said 'altered her thinking' and changed her perception of the norms concerning animal use that she had been socialised into. Matthew, who was four years younger, thus heard family conversations about the treatment of animals, from the age of eight until he became an adult, citing his sister as 'a key influence' on his eventual decision to become vegan. This decision was accelerated by what he described as two 'tipping points'. He read John Robbins' book *Diet for A New America*, which he said prompted him to think about non-human animals in 'a new way'. He said: 'I never really kind of connected until that book […] you know, if these dogs, rabbits and whoever else are individuals, what about the cows, pigs and fish, are they any different?'. Following this, Matthew became vegetarian, specifically pescatarian, saying that the reason for continuing to eat fish was because of his immediate social circle and a partner who 'wasn't supportive'. This compromise continued until he met a new partner who better understood his developing ethical stance and with whom they explored veganism as a couple. In describing how he became vegan, Matthew employed a metaphor, that of assembling a puzzle. After spending years putting pieces of that puzzle together, a 'really big puzzle piece' was watching a two-minute video on social media. Matthew said it did not contain graphic content, but 'literally showing a mum being separated from her son'. The 'mum' was a cow and the 'son' was separated from her 'so she could be used for her milk'. Matthew said this was the point when 'it really clicked' and he experienced a feeling akin to a physical sensation: 'As a vegetarian […] this really, uncomfortable scratch, like moral discomfort, I would say, was in the back of my mind and I thought I'd ticked the box, and then I saw that video and I was like, I don't think I've ticked the box […] because I'd shifted from one form of animal use to another.'

In telling the story of how she became vegan, Fiona said 'there was no sort of thunderbolt', but then proceeded to relate a narrative that fitted with the typology of the witnessing narrative followed by a significant moment that propelled her into the action of becoming a vegan. Prior to this, she had been a vegetarian for some 35 years, having taken the decision to stop eating all meat at the age of

17. Even as a child, she 'didn't feel comfortable eating flesh' and would reject the lamb that her grandmother gave her to eat, knowing that it was a lamb and being aware of how it had once been a sentient being. While at college, she had met another student who was a vegan, but remembered thinking the vegan student was 'a bit extreme'. Even in more than three decades of being a vegetarian, Fiona continued to think that veganism was extreme 'and couldn't quite get my head round it'. However, in recent years, she had started to research veganism in more depth, in the context of climate change. She joined Twitter and started following a vegan activist. One of his posts featured a video that, as Fiona described it, played on her conscience. 'Once I'd seen it,' she said, 'I couldn't unsee it.' The video depicted a farmer taking a male calf, destined for the veal trade, away from a cow who had given birth about an hour before. The cow, said Fiona, was 'absolutely inconsolable' and ran after the tractor in distress. She said: 'I thought: Jesus! Do you know, this is ridiculous. I cannot believe we are doing this […] I'm just, you know, ignoring what's right in front of me.' Fiona linked the distress of the cow to herself as a human mother of two children. This then prompted an 'overnight' decision to stop consuming dairy. Although she had known for years about the dairy industry, until seeing the video, 'it just didn't click'. She added: 'I knew all that was going on, it just seemed to click at that particular point in my life.' Although she had made connections about animal use from an early age, the forcible separation of cow and calf in a social media post became a relational witnessing moment that led to the action of becoming a vegan.

Asking activist Zach to relate the story of how he became vegan, he said the question was one he found interesting, because he did not think that people became vegan overnight. Rather, he regarded becoming vegan as a gradual process of 'working through things' and 'making realisations'. He described his own experiences as ones that he 'stumbled upon', pinpointing separate chance events that led to him becoming vegan. These events had started with dating a woman who was thinking about becoming vegan. Sometime after, Zach watched a YouTube channel about bodybuilding in which the content creators had decided to stop eating meat after they were horrified by watching slaughterhouse footage. They had posted a link to this footage, which Zach chose not to watch, later reflecting on why he did not want to watch it. While he had 'accidentally stumbled across

slaughterhouse footage online before', he would look away or close the browser. Zach continued to locate other significant moments towards becoming vegan, describing how he explored social media content about veganism. He said that he remembered being shocked about what happens to male chicks in the egg-production industry, referring to the maceration process in which chicks are either crushed between two rapidly rotating rollers or killed by rapidly moving blades that mince them to death. Another moment of realisation was when he became aware of his perceptions of the process of slaughter, which he described as a 'slightly xenophobic idea that halal was wrong' but that 'British slaughter was fine'. He also talked about finding out more about the dairy industry and its processes, in which he developed an appreciation of a cow as a mother, noting 'the fact that cows don't make milk, mothers do […] they have to have a baby in order to produce the milk'. However, it was a YouTube video that seemed to accelerate Zach's perception of animal rights, in which a particular word conveying slaughter on a mass scale was used to describe the animal agriculture industry. 'This guy was doing like a Q&A,' said Zach. 'Someone asked him, what do you want to achieve in your life? And he said he wanted to change the meat industry because it's a holocaust for animals. And I […] thought, blimey, that's quite a strong thing to say. But then thought […] OK, maybe there is something in that.' Zach's story of becoming vegan follows the typology of the witnessing narrative. He sees social media posts that depict animal suffering and death, such as the macerated chicks and the slaughterhouse footage. However, one particular piece of content that presents animal agriculture as analogous to a holocaust is significant in that it galvanises Zach into becoming a vegan and, following this, to take action upon what he has seen by becoming an activist.

Zach's process of 'making realisations' was echoed by another activist, Nicolas, who described his journey towards veganism in metaphorical terms – planting seeds and putting together a jigsaw. Prior to making the decision to become vegan, there were several events that, in his words, 'planted some seeds', such as visiting a vegan restaurant for the first time, or participating in a trail running event and encountering a man wearing a Vegan Runners vest. Following these events, Nicolas said there were two 'larger puzzles in the jigsaw' that stood out for him. He FaceTimed a friend who was recovering from a sports accident. The friend had decided to become vegan after reading *The China*

Study (Campbell and Campbell 2017), a nutritional study of plant-based eating, telling Nicolas that he felt good eating a plant-based diet. There was a spiritual aspect to the conversation that affected Nicolas deeply. 'He said something to me which kind of like, I found quite profound at the time,' said Nicolas. 'I guess it's kind of like a spiritual thing. He said when you ingest the flesh of an animal, you take on that spirit. That kind of bad energy. So […] that kind of hit me.' After Nicolas was 'hit' with this information, he described how he poured the cow's milk at home into the toilet and joined several vegan groups on Facebook. In one of the groups, someone posted that 'every non-vegan should watch *Earthlings*'. Nicolas looked up the film on YouTube and watched it. Although he found it upsetting to watch, he carried on watching. 'I wanted to know what I didn't know,' he said, remembering reflecting on the film afterwards, feeling both sad and angry 'that all these things were happening with animals that I didn't really know about […] I realised that I wanted to go vegan because everything just kind of made sense from seeing the animal use […] I had this feeling of, I need to do this, I want to do this.' While the 'planting of seeds' could be interpreted as acts of seeing for Nicolas, it was the witnessing of the 'bad energy' of ingesting the flesh of an animal that led to the response of pouring away the cow's milk, becoming vegan and, soon after, becoming an animal-rights activist. His account also carries an emotional charge, particularly in how he recalled watching *Earthlings* on YouTube, which he said was 'upsetting' but continued to watch because he wanted to discover how animals are exploited. Realising the extent of this exploitation, Nicolas was moved to anger. After watching *Earthlings*, Nicolas said that he could not bring himself to eat the leg of lamb that had been sitting in his fridge. He gave the lamb to a kitchen for the homeless, then started following animal-rights activists on YouTube. Soon after this, he made the decision to become an animal-rights activist.

In the six witnessing narratives presented above, vegans retrospectively make sense of the incidents in their lives that lead up to a momentous event – a witnessing moment – that compels them to become vegan. Thea's family friend makes a connection between pet animals and domestic animals, which prompts Thea to 'wake up' to the ways in which animals are used for human benefit. For Chloe, the hard-hitting footage of *Dominion* draws a line between her previous way of life and her

future self, while for Matthew and Fiona, videos about dairy production on social media are encountered as powerful moments of relationality between human and non-human bodies. Zach and Nicolas are galvanised into animal activism by particular words, 'holocaust' and 'bad energy', which evoke events far more momentous than the deaths of individual animals. Vegans' biographical reconstructions employ metaphors ('connecting the dots'; 'planting seeds'; 'assembling a puzzle'; 'muddling'; 'stumbling') to describe how previously unconnected moments become grouped together into a witnessing narrative. Here, witnessing is understood as a pathway to action (Ristovska 2016: 1043). In their witnessing narratives, vegans relate a critical moment that separates their pasts from their futures. For Chloe and Nicolas, this involves throwing away the animal foods that they possess, while for Matthew, his 'uncomfortable scratch' of what he calls 'moral discomfort' is piqued by watching the dairy video. Both Fiona and Matthew locate the agony of separation – of cow from calf – as a point of no return. Here, the suffering of an animal demands responsibility from the person that has witnessed this intimate event (Dave 2014: 434). Through relating their witnessing narratives, vegans act on the suffering of animals and undergo what Oliver (2015: 482) describes as a transformation of recognition into compassion. The witnessing narratives presented above also illustrate how vegans experience a connection between themselves as individual human beings to the individuality of other animals. This Levinsian moment of coming face to face with the alterity of a non-human individual – and becoming responsible towards the other (Levinas 1985: 86-87) – is a witnessing that requires a response and makes political the embodied experiences of animals (Gillespie 2016: 576-579). In the second part of this chapter, I will show how some vegans' witnessing narratives articulate a perception of the world around them as an illusion, which is shattered by the discovery of what they regard as a truth.

5.2 Awakening narratives

Having presented a number of witnessing narratives that exemplify the relationality between human and non-human animals, which is arrived at through making a series of connections, the following stories show how becoming vegan also affords a new way of experiencing the world in which gaps in personal knowledge are framed as a truth. These vegans articulate a realisation that the truth

about animal use has been hitherto concealed from them by societal norms. Veganism, in these narratives, is not only connective, uniting humans and non-human animals in their shared sentience, but it is also a vehicle by which the truth – about animal use and societal attitudes towards animals – can be unveiled. In the previous section, talking about how the words of a family friend alerted her to the connection between species, Thea said: 'It was like I suddenly woke up.' The following stories show how becoming vegan can be experienced as an awakening that leads to a vegan truth.

Amanda, the activist to whom I had described my drive past the slaughterhouse trucks on the M40 motorway, as reported in the previous chapter, had likened her path to becoming vegan as akin to a matrix. When she first went online looking for information about veganism, she discovered what she called the 'cool vegan people', YouTubers such as Earthling Ed, through which Amanda 'found out that my money was going towards this suffering that I didn't want to be part of any longer'. It was not only that she saw the suffering of animals, but was made aware of wider societal forces that she perceived were geared towards the maintenance of animal suffering. Her words suggested that she had seen more than this suffering – she had become cognisant of an alternate reality that had been hitherto shrouded from her view. Speaking of the significant moment when she decided to become vegan, Amanda described it as 'one of the most profound experiences that I've ever had, this sort of like, what is happening […] It's not even too far to go to call it that I entered the matrix – or did I exit the matrix? I think I exited the matrix.' She was referring to the 1999 science fiction film *The Matrix*, in which the character Neo can choose to free himself from a machine-generated dream world, which he can stay in by taking the 'blue pill', and instead live in the 'real world'. To take the red pill means learning an unsettling truth. 'It's like taking the red pill,' continued Amanda, 'and waking up […] you see violence everywhere, you see pain and suffering all the time […] it really was that profound.' Although Amanda was not able to locate a single moment in which she had decided to become vegan, the content she had witnessed on social media had eventually led to a state of knowing – and breaking with a past of not-knowing – in which violence, pain and suffering were ever-present. She had been awakened to a new reality from which, she said, there was no going back from.

A different interview participant, Rachel, echoed the notion of passing a point of no return when she told me about a documentary she watched called *What the Health*, a follow-up to another popular documentary promoting plant-based diets called *Cowspiracy.* According to its website, *What the Health* 'exposes the collusion and corruption in government and big business that is […] keeping us sick'. I asked Rachel if there was any particular online content that she found significant when she took the decision to become vegan, content that perhaps enabled her to perceive the commonalities of humans and non-human animals in a new way. She told me about a man she had seen on social media. She could not remember his name but could 'really remember what he said'. She recalled that he had said he woke up one morning and something 'struck him straight away'. He had been a meat-eater, but then it suddenly occurred to him that one day, he would have to pay for all the harm that he had caused. After that, said Rachel, he became a vegan straight away. Rachel added: 'I don't necessarily think that people will pay for the harm that they've caused, I don't think that at all, but I think I might pay for the harm I've caused, because once you know about it […] there's no going back.' The notion of passing a point of no return recalled the words of Amanda, who had said she would 'not go back to not knowing'. The sentiment of not turning back from veganism was echoed by other research participants. As described in the previous section, Chloe said she would 'never go back to the previous way I was living', while Fiona watched a social media post depicting a calf being forcibly separated from its mother and 'couldn't unsee it'. These participants' words conveyed a type of one-way journey, an enlightened state in which a previous way of knowing the world could not be returned to.

Some months after I talked to Amanda, I interviewed a British activist called Mark. Mark's introduction to veganism, and subsequently to a new way of seeing the world around him, was experienced in the context of reaching his late forties and starting to think more about his future health. He did not want, through ill health later in his life, to be a burden to his son, so he decided to change his eating habits, starting with a juice diet. After juicing vegetables and fruits, Mark noticed that he felt and looked better than previously before. A while later, he was talking to a colleague who said that her husband had been vegan for a while and that she had a book called *Meat is for Pussies*, written by

the lead singer of American punk band Cro-Mags, John Joseph. Mark found the book interesting when he read it, not because of the 'hippy, tree-hugging thing about the animals', but because it was about the pharmaceutical industry, 'the allopathic [conventional medicine] side of things', which Mark said 'spoke' to him. He said that the book alerted him to the notion that 'doctors and the pharmaceutical industry want us to be ill'. Through his research, Mark discovered that a plant-based diet had the potential to cure illness and prevent disease. As a result of reading the book, Mark tried giving up meat in his diet. He did not call himself a vegan at this point, but someone who was eating a plant-based diet. He continued to eat fish, as he was a 'big gym-goer' and needed to consume protein: a belief he described as being 'under the protein myth'. Finally, he made the 'final push' and stopped eating fish, becoming fully plant-based. However, through browsing plant-based recipes to try, he encountered vegan content online, including vegan YouTubers. At this point, what he related as his 'eureka moment', he started 'seeing what was really happening'. He started to perceive a disconnect between what he had believed himself to be – an animal-lover who would always bring injured birds indoors to look after them – and the reality of being someone who also consumed animals. At the realisation of this contradiction, he decided to become a vegan.

I asked Mark what kind of content he had been watching on YouTube that caused what he called his 'eureka moment'. He said that documentaries such as *Forks Over Knives* and *Earthlings* had been instrumental in this decision, because they enabled him to see animal abuse that he had not been aware of previously. He also watched vegan YouTubers Joey Carbstrong and Earthling Ed, in particular the cogent arguments that they put forward for veganism on their popular social media channels. After watching these videos, Mark started to share what he had learned about veganism with his Facebook contacts, which led to people questioning his new stance. When he found himself unable to answer their questions, he would turn to vegan YouTubers so that he could research and refine his arguments. This in turn reinforced his nascent conviction that he was doing the right thing. 'If you listen to the arguments,' Mark said, 'and continue doing what you're doing, you're just an animal abuser. Pre-that, you've been indoctrinated.' He contrasted the process of becoming vegan with another moment in his life, when he stopped being a racist. Up until the age of 14, Mark said

that he was racist against British Asians. He said he had been taught – by his peers and by his parents – that Asians had come to the UK to take jobs from British workers. Mark said that at this time, he became uncomfortable with the racism he had been socialised into, came to a realisation that it was wrong to be a racist and so he stopped holding racist views. He described what had happened in his youth as indoctrination and 'brainwashing'. Similarly, in becoming a vegan in middle age, he had come to see that he had been indoctrinated into consuming animals and had subsequently changed his diet.

Since becoming vegan, Mark said that he faced 'ridicule' from friends and family. His immediate family had not followed him into veganism, still preferring what he termed 'the death alternative'. He added that his friends had also 'drifted away'. Whether they had drifted because of Mark's veganism or for other reasons, Mark did not know. He said he knew that it was hard for others to cater to his dietary needs when there was a celebration, or that they would prefer to dine somewhere where they could eat meat. In going against the grain of normative animal consumption, his refusal to eat animals represented a challenge to his friends and family. 'Basically,' he said, 'what you're saying to people is, your doctors have lied to you, your mother and father, your grandma and grandad, your government, the ads on TV, everybody's lied to you all your life. You've lived a lie all your life.' This was 'a hard pill to swallow', he added, but he said people he knew exactly what he meant when he talked about his veganism, because they were all aware of where meat came from. He added that it was a truth that they could not deny. Mark illustrated his point by saying how learning about dairy production had been an 'eye-opener' for him. Until he became vegan, he had assumed that cows were merely 'milk-producing machines' that ate grass, which later produced milk. He did not know that the cows needed to be pregnant to produce the milk. In hindsight, and with the new knowledge afforded to him by learning about animal agriculture, he felt that this truth was now obvious to him in a way that it was not before becoming a vegan.

While Mark had become vegan for animals, he also positioned becoming vegan as something that represented more than a 'hippy, tree-hugging thing'. In acquiring new knowledge about animal agriculture, Mark was prompted to perceive society in a different way. Sometimes, this meant taking a stance against rules that he now saw as unjust. He said that at his previous workplace, he was given leather boots as part of his uniform. He told his employer that the boots needed to be vegan, but the employer said that they did not supply vegan boots. He offered to buy the boots himself if the employer gave him the money. After some back and forth, the employer eventually relented. In a different employment, Mark asked for non-leather work gloves. He told his employer that veganism had become a protected characteristic, pointing out that if a Muslim employee refused to wear pigskin gloves, would they question these beliefs, or run the risk of being sued under equalities legislation? The employer said that they would not question a Muslim's beliefs and so Mark was given rubber gloves. Veganism, said Mark, was not only a philosophical viewpoint, it was also a protest and 'an awakening from a lifetime of brainwashing, of being told how you should think'. In his previous non-vegan life, he said that society had told him that a dog was a pet and a pig was food. He said he hated the way this thinking had influenced him from such an early age and that he was made to eat animals when he did not need to. However, he had now embarked on what he called a 'total lifestyle change' in which he could finally think for himself.

I asked Mark if he would consider his 'philosophical viewpoint' as a belief. He shook his head. 'Do you believe pigs are put in chambers and then stabbed in the throat? […] That's not a belief, that's a fact.' It was not, he added, a religious belief, like believing in the Second Coming of Jesus. Pigs being killed in gas chambers was a fact, not any sort of belief. He conceded that veganism's relatively new status as a protected philosophical belief could be useful to help vegans confidently take a stand, as he had shown through asking his previous employers for non-leather gloves. However, he held what he termed an 'aversion' to religion, which contextualised his opposition to the idea of veganism being a belief. While he had been brought up as Church of England and had been confirmed – albeit because his parents wanted him to be admitted into a particularly good school – he viewed religion as a negative force that placed people into conflict with one another. When

answering the religion question on the Census, he had put 'Jedi'. He explained why he had put Jedi on the Census form. 'Just to say fuck you […] I hate society. I hate my government. I see myself as a person born on a piece of ground. With political lines drawn around. And if it wasn't for the fact that I've got to, I wouldn't abide by the rules that are set to us [...] because of the animal abuse that goes on.' Becoming vegan was not only about taking a stance against the oppression of animals, but was also a way of taking a stand against society. 'It's the matrix,' Mark said. 'It's definitely the matrix for me.'

In the matrix that Amanda and Mark describe, becoming vegan affords the potential of discovering truths about the world that, once seen, cannot be unseen. While the metaphors presented in the first section of this chapter illustrate a new recognition of relationality between human and non-human, Mark is not merely concerned with the plight of animals, but with wider societal forces. He reads literature about conventional medicine, forming beliefs about how doctors and the pharmaceutical industry are actively encouraging illness to protect their own interests. This conspiratorial thinking leads him to see what is 'really happening', to perceive his hitherto received wisdom as a series of potential lies that have been sold to him. He suspects he has been 'brainwashed': into religion, into racism, into consuming animals. He thinks back to gaps in his knowledge, such as cows needing to be pregnant to produce milk, and questions this lack of knowledge as something that other people did not inform him of. Unsurprisingly, Mark has a strong mistrust of society, expressing his disdain by putting 'Jedi' on the Census. Mark's decision to declare 'Jedi' sits in the context of a phenomenon that developed at the start of the twenty-first century: invented religions that employ popular cultural discourses for religious, quasi-religious or pseudo-religious purposes (Cusack 2010: 113). Jediism emerged from a 2001 prank chain email campaign that eventually resulted in more than 50,000 people declaring that they were practising the Jedi religion in the 2001 New Zealand Census. This developed into a global phenomenon – by 2011, 177,632 people in England and Wales called themselves Jedis in the Census (Cheung 2019: 351).

In the film *The Matrix*, the viewer is asked to question what they have been taught and to separate illusion from reality. The film also asks the viewer to consider that they may have been misled; in the context of animal advocacy, this requires individuals to confront difficult realities (Grillo 2016). The final story in this chapter is that of Miles, whose becoming-vegan story shows how veganism affords the potential of discovering one's own truth about the world. While Miles does not explicitly mention *The Matrix*, his story nonetheless illustrates how a vegan can come to perceive an illusion that has prevented them from seeing and experiencing reality. His story also follows the typology of the stories already presented in this chapter, in that he experiences a number of events that lead to a crucial moment of becoming vegan.

In recounting his journey towards becoming vegan, Miles decided to tell the story in reverse order, starting with the moment at which he became vegan. Up to this point, he had been a vegetarian. He was reading a magazine for vegetarians and inside the magazine there was a leaflet from The Vegan Society detailing how eggs, milk and honey were produced. He read the leaflet and had what he called 'an instantaneous epiphany', which led to becoming vegan. Miles then proceeded to talk about his childhood, relating some incidents in which he said he had been lied to about the truth of how animals were used for clothing and food. As a child, he was with his parents in a forest in northern Europe and saw cages of mink 'piled high […] 20-long, three-deep'. Miles asked his parents why the mink were in cages. They told him that the animals were pets and that they would be fine. Miles commented: 'Actually, they were going to be pelts. Which is sort of similar. Slight misspelling.' He told another childhood story of visiting a butchery in the north of England with his mother, which had a slaughterhouse at the back. Miles said that his mother asked for lamb chops and the butcher, in a clean white apron, disappeared out to the back. When the butcher returned, his apron was spattered with blood. Miles asked his mother what had happened and she said that he must have gone to a fridge and spilt something on him. These stories, said Miles, showed how he was 'lied to continuously' before reaching an age of maturity in which he could think and act for himself, resulting in becoming vegan, 'having been shown the truth'.

Speaking of his gradual realisation about how animals were exploited, Miles said that 'the truth wasn't revealed to me' and that there is a system geared up to hide this truth, such as the packaging of meat in supermarkets and the depiction of happy chickens on the packaging of eggboxes rather than 'miserable chickens living in their own faeces'. This was, he said, symptomatic of a wider 'pervasive mistruth' and misrepresentation 'that goes on at a fundamental level'. Despret (2016: 83) notes that abattoirs have disappeared from town centres and the reminders of a living animal and their recognisable features are now hidden, while Bulliet (2005: 19) reports how meat is now presented on Styrofoam trays, sanitised from the act of killing and dismembering animals. This kind of concealment, said Miles, was allowed to continue because it benefits the people who receive money advertising animal products.

Following from his revelation of vegan truth, I asked Miles if, since becoming vegan, he now experienced the world differently. 'I detest a lot of it,' he replied, explaining how he felt that much of the world around him was full of people 'being lied to' and that having been shown the vegan truth, he saw 'the political lies, all these other kinds of lies […] small lies, white lies, little mistruths'. He used consumerism as an example, describing people walking about shopping malls with eyes 'glazed over, with shopping bags full of nonsense', which he likened to zombie apocalypse movie *The Day of the Dead* as a 'parody of the real world […] because you're attuned to seeing through one set of lies, you see through the rest as well'. Becoming vegan, described Miles, was like 'a veil being lifted […] the veil of ignorance being lifted'. He added that in the same way a fish does not know it is in water, humans also do not know their own existence because they are trapped within this very existence. Veganism was thus a way of lifting oneself out of one's existence, to question why millions of animals are incarcerated and bred solely for human consumption. Challenging this situation was, said Miles, 'a lifting of the veil, letting truth in'. The becoming-vegan story of Miles will be revisited in the next chapter, to show how some vegans reject the notion of veganism as a belief, insisting that the oppression of animals is a directly observable fact – a truth – rather than something that is believed in.

Participants' biographical reconstructions of becoming vegan, as presented in this chapter, are presented as witnessing narratives. In these narratives, vegans locate a vital moment at which they take action and seek to pass the knowledge they have acquired to others. Through witnessing, and its sharing of untold or hidden stories, action is also demanded of others (Rosenfeld 2021: 4). Oliver (2015: 489) explains that in *Animal Lessons* (2009), she expands the notion of witnessing to include non-human animals; here, witnessing is the 'ability to respond', whereby witnessing as response ethics moves beyond human centrism towards a wider consideration of how non-humans respond.

The vegan witnessing narratives that have been presented in this chapter, and which will be explored further in the next chapter, are performative acts of ethical witnessing that exhort non-vegan individuals to respond to the suffering of animals. Various metaphors – connecting the dots, assembling a puzzle, planting seeds – are employed to describe an incremental journey that culminates in a vegan testifying to the oppression of animals. Sometimes, as part of this witnessing narrative, a vegan may describe a point of no return. For example, Fiona witnessed a calf being separated from his mother, an image that could not be 'unseen'. The witnessing narratives suggest that while vegans may see, or notice, such harms – often through what they see online – some are significant enough to act as witnessing moments, which result in the action of becoming vegan. The stories of Amanda, Mark and Miles have also been presented as awakening narratives. DeGloma (2010: 519-521) shows how individuals and communities in diverse contexts – not just religious ones – employ awakening narratives, described as 'important mechanisms of mnemonic and autobiographical revision'. They are used by individuals to explain and redefine their past experiences, as well as help to make sense of significant transformations of their worldviews. In telling stories of awakening, suggests DeGloma, seemingly personal discoveries of truth are illuminated with 'social logic'. Individuals may 'see the light', or 'wake up' in discovering this truth, after which they may come to see their prior perceptions and beliefs as false or deluded. Moreover, adds DeGloma, awakening stories do not reveal a previously hidden truth but discover a previously unknown truth. Casey (2019: 758) notes that awakening stories are not just limited to experiences of religious conversion, but the notion of awakening is used in other contexts, such as those who

become 'woke' when thinking about issues of social justice, or when young people reject the liberalism of their parents to become politically conservative, describing themselves as being 'red-pilled'. In *The Matrix*, explains Casey, the film's protagonist takes a red pill to be initiated into the hidden truths of his world. Casey adds that in awakening stories, individuals move from a state of darkness into a state of light, from ignorance to enlightenment. The narratives in this chapter can be considered in the framework of awakening narratives, in which 'awakeners', in DeGloma's words (2010: 534), establish 'a unique epistemic, cognitive and moral footing'.

The awakening narrative is useful in analysing vegans' personal discoveries of truth, since it offers pliancy to help understand participants' understandings and articulations of belief and truth regardless of their religious or non-religious affiliations. The notion of 'conversion' to veganism had been employed in presenting the results of the pilot fieldwork: analysis of YouTubers' becoming-vegan stories suggested that they had undergone a transformative conversion experience after watching digital content about animal agriculture (Harding and Day 2021). However, the awakening narrative offers a method by which to analyse individuals' truth and belief narratives without drawing on religious conversion models. Additionally, the witnessing narratives and awakening narratives in this chapter are also presented as testimony, which has both juridical and religious connotations (Oliver 2001: 31). Testimony is also a tool for retelling one's past in light of acquiring new convictions, leading to an individual performatively presenting a new self in the presence of others (Vliek 2019: 9, drawing on Sremac 2013).

This chapter has presented data that shows how research participants use connective metaphors and awakening narratives to convey their experiences of becoming vegan. Vegans' witnessing narratives are shown to be political and action-oriented, transmitting vegan truth and belief to others. The performativity of philosophical belief is explored in more detail in the next chapter, including showing how vegans discover – and subsequently transmit to others – a vegan truth.

6 Veganism as a Performative Act of Bearing Witness

6.1 Ethics shaped by conflict

In the following chapter, I propose that veganism, as a philosophical belief, is a performative act of bearing witness. In this mode of social action, the 'doing' of veganism is shaped significantly by the vegan's relation to their non-vegan other. Vegans' testimonial actions, which can produce and perform a vegan truth, are transmitted in a context of hostility. Moreover, in responding to the trauma of violence towards non-human animals, vegans' affective testimonial addresses can seek to moralise the future actions of potential co-witnesses. This chapter starts by discussing how vegans' ethics are often shaped by conflict, particularly the hostile responses of others. Employing interview data, I will show how vegans express their beliefs in anticipation of potential conflict and how their words and actions act as performative utterances to engineer the possibility of an uptake of their vegan messages.

Even before choosing veganism as a case study for my research, I was well aware of how veganism's growing prominence in public discourse was accompanied by hostility to this ethical stance. In 2019, a *Guardian* feature suggested that veganism in the UK went mainstream at the point when broadcaster Piers Morgan tweeted UK bakery chain Greggs – which had launched a Quorn-based vegan sausage roll in January 2019 – to declare 'nobody was waiting for a vegan bloody sausage, you PC-ravaged clowns' (Reynolds 2019). Greggs' social media team rose to Morgan's aggression – 'Oh hello Piers, we've been expecting you' – which led to #greggsvegansausageroll becoming the top-trending hashtag in the UK and the company's share price leaping by 13 per cent (Hickman 2019). There were earlier flashpoints in the mainstreaming of veganism, according to the *Guardian*'s account, the journalistic angle of which was an apparent 'war' on vegans. A NatWest bank employee told a customer applying for a loan that 'all vegans should be punched in the face', while *Waitrose Food* editor William Sitwell was forced to resign from his post in 2018 after casually joking in an email about 'killing vegans one by one'. These incidents illustrate how veganism is often met with ridicule, if not downright belligerence. In facing the animosity of others to their ethical practices, vegans are engaged in a laborious transmission of their testimonial messages. One

interview participant, a content creator named Joshua, noted that vegans were a small group of people 'with strong beliefs', underdog figures who felt as though they had to communicate their message forcefully to be heard. 'Sometimes it can be seen as aggressive or pushy,' he said, which resulted in non-vegans reacting negatively towards vegans' messages, 'even if they [non-vegans] do believe [veganism is] right'. Another content creator, Elliott, discussing the shortform videos he made for TikTok, said that '99 per cent' of the comments in response to his videos were from 'teenage trolls who add no value at all to any kind of conversation' and that it was 'mentally exhausting' to deal with hostile responses to his comments. Activist Jamie described social media as 'one of the worst modes of communication', since without the physical, face-to-face aspect of interaction, he could not see facial expressions and was left to interpret emotions through text, in the form of comments. He said that while someone could make a comment online that was 'perfectly innocent', it could be misconstrued in way 'where the other person feels like they're being confrontational, and so it just spirals into a dumpster fire'. The exchange of hostile responses is not limited to online interactions. Some vegans described more explicitly aggressive acts of hostility if they were engaging in outreach with members of the public. Activist Sean described a bystander in a vegan street event who waved meat in activists' faces. Sean did not use the word meat himself but instead employed the word 'flesh', which performatively underlined the connection between human and non-human bodies. He said that at another event, he was pelted with chicken nuggets. It echoed the experience of another interview participant, Chloe, whose becoming-vegan story was described in the previous chapter. She had taken part in anti-dairy activism and said that during a protest, cow's milk had been thrown in her face.

Interview participant Hannah said that she was the only vegan in her family. In describing how she managed this situation, the first thing she said was that she did not like to be a 'burden' or 'high maintenance'. In negotiating mealtimes with friends and family, she would tell others to cook what they wanted to cook and she would eat what she could eat, or that she would bring her own food. Even though she made these accommodations, others would challenge her ethical decisions. She related a story about a time when her family had burgers for dinner and Hannah's mother bought her

a plant-based Beyond Burger. Although Hannah's mother made this concession, she made a minor, but pointed, comment about how the Beyond Burgers smelled 'gross'. Another time, Hannah was watching a movie with her friend and he said that he had made popcorn with dairy butter. Hannah said she could not eat it, being vegan. 'You *can* eat it,' replied her friend, implying that she had the choice to eat the butter. Hannah then repeated her sentence to stress that she would not eat it, countering her friend's resistance to her veganism. She said she found these types of comments 'really agitating' and that it felt as though no one understood why she was vegan. She also added that she was 'not a person who wants to push it [veganism] on someone'.

In other conversations, research participants recounted the resistance of family and friends to their veganism. This caused some vegans to modify their behaviours in ways that would not seem, in their words, 'pushy' or 'militant' to non-vegans. Activist Eve remarked on how people could sometimes be 'a bit confrontational'. Since she did not consider herself to be a confrontational person, she tried to communicate her ethics in more subtle ways, such as asking people what they thought of veganism or encouraging them to feel empathy with farm animals 'rather than shoving it [veganism] down their face'. Julie, meanwhile, said that over the years, she had learned to adapt herself 'in a certain way' and to not use terminology that non-vegans would potentially feel offended by. She added that she did not 'go round trying to convert' others to veganism and that while she did try to influence non-vegans, it was not in a patronising way: 'I'm not sort of shouting down at people or anything like that.' Another participant, Fiona, articulated a certain distaste about vegans who 'rant'. In the previous chapter, she related her distress of seeing social media clip of a cow separated from her calf. Fiona said that this clip was posted by a content creator she described as a 'gentle activist' who 'tries to educate rather than rant about [veganism]'. As well as an awareness of these stereotypical ideas about strident vegans, interview participants also discussed the ways in which vegans were stigmatised by others, illustrating this stigma through terms such as 'aliens', 'wackos', 'lunatics', 'woo woo' and 'tree-hugging weirdos'. Mark acknowledged the 'hippy' image of being vegan, which he rejected robustly in favour of a form of working-class masculinity. 'I'm proud to be vegan,' he said.

'I'm not wearing tie-dye baggy pants and sandals […] I go to the gym, if anyone calls me a name, I'll smack 'em in the fucking nose. I'm a normal guy, I'm a Northern working-class man. And I'm vegan.'

Vegans also communicate performative utterances that convey meaning and intention to create a social reality through language. Speech does not simply convey something but, rather, it does something. This performativity was conveyed by a joke Mark told me in our interview. I had heard it before during fieldwork and knew the punchline already. 'How do you know someone's vegan? They will tell you within three seconds of meeting them.' Mark had said that in his day-to-day life, he always tried to advocate for veganism because vegans were acting as a 'voice for the oppressed […] we've got to speak up and stand up whenever we can'. He said that whenever he went to the gym and saw an overweight man on a treadmill, he would try to strike up a conversation with him, not about veganism specifically, but about the 'scientifically proven' benefits of a plant-based diet to lower one's BMI (body mass index). Mark said that when he was trying this approach of outreach, it was important not to mention veganism. Instead, he would open the conversation by emphasising the health benefits of a plant-based diet, with the hope that the uptake of his message would lead to someone eventually considering the ethical message of veganism and animal rights. Another participant, Daniela, said that if she was invited to eat with others, she would explain that she needed to eat 'in a certain way' and then if questions were asked of her about her dietary preferences, she would only speak about veganism in dietary and health terms. If someone she was dining with showed interest in her diet, Daniela would then introduce an ethical aspect to the conversation, such as pointing out that there was not a difference between the food on the plate and the flesh of a 'pet' animal such as a cat or a dog. Amanda, meanwhile, described everyday acts of activism such as going to a restaurant and asking for a vegan menu, being careful not to act like 'a jerk', in her words, but to engineer an engagement with the concept of veganism. Alternatively, she would ask the server if there was anything vegan on the menu, even though she knew there was not, having researched the menu beforehand. This type of activism was described by Amanda as 'planting a seed', which can be considered as a performative utterance designed not simply to ask for vegan food, but to open the possibility of an uptake of the vegan message. She said that an action such as this was

the act of 'speaking out', whereby 'just talking about veganism is itself an action'. The everyday

utterances of Mark, Daniela and Amanda can be viewed as what Fridlund (2020: 215-220, drawing

on Austin 1962) describes as snippets of political discourse, 'circulating talk' that performs beyond

describing or reporting, whereby the veracity of an utterance is less important than what happens as

a result of the utterance taking place.

As well as speech acts, participants also described how they used their bodies as sites through

which they could transmit their ethical message. In this manner, their bodies were engaged with their

social contexts (Jacobson et al 2016: 52). The most striking example of performative embodiment

discussed in interviews was how some vegans discussed their vows to not eat at any table where

animals were being consumed. The Liberation Pledge is, as described on its website, 'an active

stance against violence' that commits vegans to publicly refusing to eat animals; to refuse to sit

where animals are being eaten; and to encourage others to take the pledge. Its aim is 'to show

respect for victims of violence, to demonstrate opposition to a brutal system and to push all those

around us to build a more peaceful world by refusing to eat animals – or sit at a table where a victim's

body is being eaten'. Those taking the pledge wear a bracelet made from a bent fork as a symbol of

their allegiance, so that the fork becomes a symbol of non-violence.

In the previous chapter, activist Thea's story was used to introduce the witnessing narrative and how

such a story can employ metaphors of connection to suggest a slow process of realisation about

animal use, which culminates in an individual's decision to become vegan. Later in the interview,

Thea said that she had taken the Liberation Pledge in the past. Because of the pledge, she sought

to avoid social events where she was likely to encounter the consumption of animals. This became

a repeated action, one that she said she had to explain to her friends 'a million times'. Her ethics are

not only performative in their repetition but her words to her friends also show how her veganism is,

in part, formed in relation to hostility from others. In the past, Thea had worn the Liberation Pledge

fork around her wrist. On reflection, she later came to view the pledge as a form of discrimination

against vegans who could not, whether through work or family circumstances, refuse invitations to eat with others. She said that to not sit at a table where animals were being consumed was a privilege that was afforded to her by her lifestyle. If she had worked in a job that required her to take clients out to dinner, she added, she would not be able to refuse to eat with those clients on ethical grounds. Echoing discussions of the pushy vegan stereotype, as discussed above, she said: 'It's not a good idea to use it [the Liberation Pledge] as a symbol to rub in people's faces.' When she had worn the Liberation Pledge fork around her wrist in the past, it served as a daily reminder of her ethics – not only to Thea herself, but also to her friends, who eventually stopped 'nagging' her about her ethical choices. She said: 'It was like they finally got it – I'm not going to sit at that table while they are eating animal parts.' Later, she said she realised that wearing the fork bracelet was an act of expressing her privilege, rather than expressing her ethics. Thus, she took the decision to stop wearing the bracelet. However, Thea still avoided gatherings where animals were being eaten. This action came with a price. There is a parallel here with Mark's story in the previous chapter: he described how his friends, who had ridiculed his veganism, had drifted away. Similarly, Thea said that she did not see her friends as often as she used to. Although they contacted her from time to time and suggested going to a vegan restaurant, Thea said that her friends felt awkward around her when they were discussing food or where to eat. She would receive invitations for dinner parties and friends would tell her that they would provide vegan food for her, but that there would also be non-vegan food for others. While Thea had chosen to attend such gatherings in the past, she now chose not to, as she felt stressed by 'animal parts on the table', which she viewed as a 'violation [of] vows'. In seeing those body parts on the table, Thea said she carried images from animals being slaughtered or abused. Consequently, social situations where she would encounter dead animals became 'a very painful experience'. Instead, when invited to an event, Thea would sit at the bar during dinner, until her friends had finished their food.

Eve and Zach also described their experiences with the Liberation Pledge. Eve had taken the pledge two years previously and described it in more positive terms. She would invite her family to eat vegan food with her and if she was visiting them for a meal, they would cook vegan food for the whole

family. In choosing to take the pledge, Eve created what she called a 'personal boundary' that was not a confrontational stance against non-vegans, but an act of 'self-care' in which she did not have to feel complicit in animal suffering by sitting at a table where animals were being served. Zach, on the other hand, found taking the Liberation Pledge more problematic. Two years previously, he had given serious consideration to taking the pledge, to the point of acquiring a fork bracelet. He said the fork sat in his drawer for months, yet he eventually decided he would not take the pledge, partly because it was somewhat rare for him to be in a situation where he would be sharing a table with people consuming animals. However, he did have non-vegan friends and had refused to split a restaurant bill if these friends were eating meat, which had led to some arguments. When he first became involved in activism, he said he 'basically disappeared' from his non-activist friendship circles for over a year. After a while, he reconnected with those friends. Zach said that if he had taken the pledge, the process of reconnecting would have been more difficult. Eventually, Zach decided that he would eat with his non-vegan friends, on the condition that they would consider having the vegan option with him and that when splitting the bill, he would only pay for what he had eaten, so as not to 'subsidise […] animal products'.

The practice of not eating at a table where animals are being consumed confronts the incomprehension of non-vegans and draws attention to oppression of animals. To refuse to eat acts as a form of testimonial labour, using one's body in remembrance of animals that have been killed for food. It is not only a refusal to consume animals, but also a performative act of liberation for non-human others. Through the examples presented thus far in this chapter, I have shown how vegans' ethics are challenged by others and how they try to engineer uptake of their ethical message in the face of incomprehension and hostility. In showing how vegans manage conflict with non-vegans, I add to earlier sociological work that has examined how vegans may feel silenced by potential conflict with non-vegans, thus engaging in face-saving techniques to prevent both parties from attack (Greenebaum 2012a, drawing on Goffman 1959), or how vegans negotiate everyday life in an animal-based, consumer-driven society (Greenebaum 2012b). Hannah, Eve, Julie and Fiona, while not explicitly describing themselves as killjoy figures, nonetheless articulated their transgression of

dominant food practices as being formed in relation to others who may potentially disapprove of their veganism; therefore, ethics are performed in anticipation of conflict. Twine (2014: 625-628) has portrayed the vegan as one who struggles against a 'dominant happiness order', drawing upon Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy (2010a: 50) and operationalising this figure to consider how vegans transgress the dominant practice of consuming animals. Buttny and Kinefuchi (2020: 565-566) employ a discursive analysis of vegans' 'problematic moments' with omnivores and contend that vegans operate within 'a site of constant negotiation', in which they construct their veganism both as an idea and as a practice. Additionally, high levels of stigma towards vegans have been explored in the literature (Greenebaum 2018: 681), notably Cole and Morgan's (2011) analysis of media representations of veganism, which argues that 'vegaphobia' is a discourse that normalises violence against animals while also ridiculing vegans as a deviant group of ascetics and extremists.

6.2 Dimensions of vegan truth and belief

Having presented the ways in which vegans communicate their testimonial messages as a performative mode of social action in a context of hostility and incomprehension, I now turn to how participants performatively communicate a vegan truth. This starts with a discussion of how some participants discuss the notion of veganism as a belief. Although they accept that veganism is a belief, and may relate this to their non-religious affiliations, other participants reject the framing of veganism as a belief. They stress that the oppression of animals is not something that is believed in but is a directly observable fact. This fact is later presented as a vegan truth, with vegans labouring to transmit this truth to others through the testimony of their activism. Truth claims counteract the claims of the animal agriculture industry, while vegan street outreach – such as the Anonymous for the Voiceless Cube of Truth events – are performative testimonial actions that present a vegan truth. Witnesses establish and assess truth in the presence of others (Nevejan and Gill 2012: 1) and in a framework of relationality, witnesses produce a truth to be witnessed by others (Hallas 2009: 10). Vegans, communicating their truth, present the possibility of others potentially discovering this truth for themselves. Potential new witnesses are not asked to believe in, or to imagine, oppression about

animals but to consider it as truth. This truth stands in opposition to what is presented as a lie, namely mainstream discourses about animals. This chapter concludes with returning to one of the study's participants Miles, whose becoming-vegan story was employed in the previous chapter to exemplify the concept of awakening narratives. In this chapter, he further illustrates how vegan truth can be experienced as a truth that is discovered for oneself, rather than a truth that is acquired through religion. In a recent study of vegan geographies, Catherine Oliver (2022: 8-9) argues that veganism and animal activism circulate around particular fluid, relational and embodied truths. Rather than explore these truths through utilitarian or rational arguments, Oliver regards these truths, as related to her by her informants, as an 'embodied sense of wrongness in eating animals'. She adds that these truths, situated in the body as embodied knowledge, are not fixed or agreed-upon, but define the vegan community. While Oliver's work is notable for its contribution to more-than-human geographies, *Witnesses to the Future* adds a more nuanced understanding of vegan belief and how the concept of belief is understood by vegans, within the context of ethical veganism's status as a philosophical belief included within the religion or belief section of the Equality Act 2010.

Before turning to my model of vegan belief, I start with a brief discussion of how belief has been problematised by sociologists and anthropologists of religion. In a wide-ranging overview of how the concept of belief has been treated in sociology and anthropology, Day (2011: 3-6) observes that how scholars locate belief is an 'often-unexamined' epistemological choice that has a bearing on their interpretations. Thus, belief is embedded in other themes, such as meaning, emotion, action, identity and rationality. Day adds that if a researcher concludes that beliefs are propositional, this may be more of a reflection on a project's research method than the beliefs of research participants. Propositional beliefs, writes Day elsewhere (2010: 10), denote a truth claim concerning reality, such as Tylor's (1871) definition of religion as a belief in spirits, or Davie's (1994) 'believing without belonging' thesis. Building on this, in tracing a disciplinary genealogy of belief, Bivins (2016: 500-502) suggests that belief is a fluid and responsive way to account for how both scholars and believers orient themselves. Cultural anthropology's turn to practice (Turner 1969; Geertz 1973) engaged

belief in its lived and social dimensions, which developed into later critiques (Smith 1991; Asad 1993; Ruel 1997) that found belief as a category is not universally central to all religious traditions.

Lindquist and Coleman (2008: 1-11) argue for writing against, rather than with, belief in anthropological work. In reviewing anthropological discussions of belief, including Needham's (1972) argument to abandon the term, they note its 'confusing' common usages. This includes Pouillon's (1979) explanation of how the word belief – as used in English, French and German – conjoins three usages. These are belief as acceptance of fact on a cognitive level; the internalisation of a statement as something that is 'held true'; and belief in the sense of having confidence, faith or trust in something. Lindquist and Coleman add that Pouillon highlights the distinction that is made between belief and knowledge, which follows from a Western distinction between the natural world (such as humans and animals) and the 'world beyond' (such as God and deities). Given these usages of belief, Lindquist and Coleman conclude anthropologists should be reflexive and sceptical when using belief as a concept. Turning to the context of this study, it is important to note that the Equality and Human Rights Commission's guide to the Equality Act (2016: 5) does not provide a definition of what belief is, except that 'belief means any religious or philosophical belief' and that courts have developed a definition of belief through legal cases they have decided. For a philosophical belief to be protected under the Act, the belief 'must affect how a person lives their life or perceives the world'. Additionally, it must 'be a belief and not just an opinion or viewpoint based on the present state of information available'. McKeown and Dunn (2021: 210) note that religion is not defined within the text of Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights – which deals with freedom of thought, belief and religion – nor in the European Court of Human Rights case law. They add that this move is deliberate, since a definition would need to be flexible enough to apply to a range of religions while also being flexible enough to apply to individual cases.

My model of vegan belief, presented here and in subsequent empirical chapters, shows how veganism as a philosophical belief is performative, embodied and affective. This builds on Day,

(2011) whose neo-Durkheimian approach relocates belief to the social realm. Day (2010: 10-19) uses the term 'performative belief' to stress the social location of belief and how it effects forms of identity that individuals employ to adapt to social situations. This model of performativity draws on Butler (1990), particularly in how identity can be produced through the repetition of lived and embodied performances. Day proposes that performative beliefs are produced in specific places, times and contexts. Rather than expressing propositional beliefs, Day's informants asserted beliefs that were expressions of belonging to other human beings. These shaped informants' identities and helped them adjust to their social contexts. In the context of veganism as a philosophical belief, I build on this work to show how vegan belief is social: how it is lived, embodied and has the capacity to be performative. To this, I add three further elements: the dimension of how belief is produced in relation to one's digital selfhood; the affective experience of acquiring and transmitting vegan belief; and the suggestion that vegans express belonging with – rather than belonging to – non-human animals. In analysing what performativity and sociality may mean when relationships are mediated digitally, I respond to a suggestion raised by Lövheim (2016b), who suggested ways in which Day's believing in belonging thesis could be mediatised. I develop this through employing elements of theoretical work on media witnessing and affect theory to produce an analysis of how vegan belief is transmitted and received as a form of testimony. This form of bearing witness involves performing a response to trauma by eliciting an affective response that seeks to moralise the future actions of others (Tait 2011: 1220-1221). Furthermore, I depart from Day's (2011: 44) identification of an anthropocentric belief orientation and argue that vegans do not locate power and authority with human beings. In contrast, their beliefs centre on a sense of belonging with the worlds of other animals. While vegan belief is social, the notion of the 'social' is not limited to the social worlds of humans. Thus, vegan belief challenges and rejects anthropocentrism. This point is covered in more detail in *9.2 A rejection of anthropocentrism*.

My informants' conceptions of belief were articulated in interviews in the context of veganism as a philosophical belief acquiring the status of a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. The ways in which they talked about belief suggested that belief was not a fixed, universally

understood concept. Rather, their understandings of belief were contingent on other factors, such as their relationship with religion. Whether they understood veganism to be a belief was expressed in the different contexts of their lives and their identities. In interviews, vegans talked about belief in a number of ways. Some regarded the framing of veganism as a belief to be useful, since it enabled their veganism to be recognised as a protected characteristic in law, granting their ethical convictions with cogency and seriousness. Other informants contested the notion that veganism could be a belief: for them, belief was entangled with religion and therefore as something that was not rooted in reality, as opposed to what they regarded as a vegan 'truth'. They understood the oppression of animals as a fact and as something that is true. Regardless of their interpretations of belief, or whether they understood themselves to hold a belief about veganism or not, the vegans in this study all, in different ways, thought with – and sometimes against – belief in the construction of their identities. Thus, their performative actions brought veganism, as a belief, into being.

In fieldwork interviews, I discussed with participants that I had chosen to investigate philosophical belief in the research study, in the light of the *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* (2020) ruling. In asking them about their understandings of the word belief, conversations would sometimes unfold into participants' discussions of how their veganism was situated apart from, or as part of, their religious or non-religious affiliations. Rather than asking 'what do you believe in?' (Day 2011: 29), participants were asked if they understood their veganism to be a belief. Several participants were comfortable using the notion of belief to describe their vegan ethics and viewed the term as having some utility in the context of equalities legislation. Amy said that being a vegan defined her 'belief system and morals' and that her veganism was 'a defining moral characteristic'. Rachel, meanwhile, said that calling a veganism a belief implied that it involved 'the bigger picture of life and death […] it's part of my bigger-picture belief'. She said that she was not religious but was not an atheist, tentatively positioning herself as agnostic. In articulating her belief, she said that she felt as though 'everything's connected' and that after death, she would 'go back to the soil where I came from and be part of the universe again'. She added that this was not a 'typical religious belief' and that there was not a god involved in her belief: 'It's all to do with just […] the randomness of it and

everything being connected.' This echoes some of the narratives of connection in *Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness*, in which participants employed metaphors ('planting a seed', 'joining the dots') in their retrospective accounts of becoming vegan. Although she does not mention non-human animals, Rachel's words also suggest an entanglement between her body and other non-human agents, such as the soil and the universe. When asked about how she had responded to the recent Census, Rachel said that she had ticked the box for 'no religion', adding: 'I probably didn't give it much thought, to be honest, and just ticked it.' When asked about whether the religion question on the Census captured her veganism or any beliefs connected to her veganism, she said that it did not.

An activist called Julie also related her beliefs to the Earth's ecosystem. She identified as a 'genuine atheist' and said that her belief was that when human beings die, 'it's nothing, there's no special place we go to'. She added: 'You become stardust, don't you? You go back and feed the Earth […] you then go on to feed the trees and plants and it's all back into the ecosystem.' When asked about whether she would use the word belief in relation to veganism, she said she 'probably would', adding: 'But I wouldn't use [say] that out loud because obviously then it looks preachy, doesn't it?'. I asked if this meant that belief had religious connotations for her and she said yes, but added that she did not use the word belief when discussing her veganism because, as already noted, she had learned to adapt herself 'in a certain way', meaning that she was sensitive to employing terms that other people would potentially be offended by. 'I would honestly say [veganism] is a belief system, that's exactly what it is,' she said. She was careful to distance veganism as a philosophical belief from religious belief, relating a story about receiving a visit from Jehovah's Witnesses. Although she told the visitors at her door that she was an atheist, they asked her how she took guidance and how she made the right decisions in life. 'They were basically saying I was kind of godless, I couldn't make correct decisions without having a book to follow.' In response, Julie told the visitors that she tried to be a good person and had demonstrated this by starting a homeless charity in her community. She added that veganism was another aspect of her life in which she was trying to do the right thing, 'to protect other sentient beings'. She said she felt it was patronising for someone else to imply that 'you can't

be a decent person if you don't follow a religion'. Julie regarded organised religion as a 'means of control'; while not regarding veganism as a religion for that reason, she agreed that it was a belief. While in the past she had, like Mark, put 'Jedi' on the Census – in Julie's case, 'because I thought it was funny' – she had recently declared herself an atheist on the Census, in the hope of potentially influencing policy decisions that would recognise non-religious individuals.

While Rachel and Julie placed their veganism in the context of their belief systems, and positioned these beliefs in relation to their non-religious identities, two participants talked about their veganism in relation to Buddhism. Eve did not describe herself as a practising Buddhist but said that she found Buddhist philosophy and practice 'really interesting' and spoke warmly of being part of a Buddhist community where she used to live. During our interview, I asked her if she would like to share her response to the religion question in the Census. 'It depends what mood I was in, really!' she laughed. 'I suppose sometimes I would put Buddhist, sometimes I would put nothing, sometimes I'd put 'I don't know' […] nothing's set in stone.' Daniela, who had been a vegan since 2015, said that she recently became a Buddhist after becoming vegan. She had been raised Christian Orthodox in her home country of Romania, became an atheist in early adulthood and then became Buddhist in 2019. She said that becoming vegan enabled her to feel compassion for animals and 'to pay more attention to what's behind the surface, to what's actually happening in one's self'. She added that this process led to a psychedelic experience that involved using ayahuasca. Following this, she became a Buddhist, 'because [the ritual] really made me look for what it is that I've [had a vision of]'.

Other participants in the study expressed unease or opposition to the idea of veganism being a belief. For these participants, a belief implied something that was not true, hinting at its connotations with religious belief. Veganism was instead a fact, a truth, since the suffering of animals to produce food could not be denied. As already reported in *5.2 Awakening narratives*, Mark insisted veganism was not a belief, it was a fact. Miles, whose story will be returned to presently, said that belief implied something that was not real. Another participant, Tony, saw the utility of including veganism in equalities legislation, but hesitated to call veganism a belief. For him, the word suggested that animal

suffering could be construed as a point of view rather than a fact. 'It's not a point of view,' he said, 'it's a fact that animals suffer. It's a fact that we don't have to cause that suffering […] there's no nutritional argument for animal products, that's been proven. So these are facts rather than beliefs.' He added that veganism was 'a moral stance against an abuse', likening veganism to anti-slavery movements of the past.

Content creator Elliott said that the moment he decided to become vegan was after watching animal-rights activist Gary Yourofsky's *Best Speech You Will Ever Hear* on YouTube at the end of 2012. The video had been shared in the Facebook feed of a music artist that Elliott was following. Before seeing the video, Elliott said he had had 'no real familiarity' with veganism and, as a carnivore, had never been interested in being vegan. In contrast with the stories of vegans in previous chapters, for whom becoming vegan is arrived at through a slow process of making connections, Elliott said that the *Best Speech* 'completely' changed his outlook instantly. The *Best Speech* video, like animal-rights documentaries such as *Earthlings* and *Dominion* (see *5.1 Witnessing narratives*) act as important artefacts of testimony, powerful in their ability to create empathy with the plight of animals who are used for the benefit of humans. They also hold potential to make a significant impact on those who receive the testimony, in some cases making a rapid impact on an individual's ethics. For example, Elliott said later in the interview that his veganism, rather than being a belief, was a 'moral imperative', which conveyed a sense of urgency in his subsequent transmission of what he had learned through the *Best Speech* video. Yourofsky's speech, given at the Georgia Institute of Technology in 2010 and which has been widely watched on YouTube ever since (4.8 million views on the YouTube channel TheAnimalHolocaust alone), shows Yourofsky talking about animals as 'the world's forgotten victims'. In the speech, Yourofsky employs a mix of rhetorical devices and dark humour juxtaposed with graphic undercover footage of animal abuse to drive his message to his audience. He asks the people gathered before him if they think there is really such a thing as humane slaughter – 'you think they get belly rubs and tushy slaps?' – before asking if there exists humane rape, humane child abuse or a humane holocaust. This brings the audience to what Yourofsky describes as the 'biggest holocaust of all', asking for an open mind from the audience so that he can 'take those blinders off',

a phrase that suggests that he is about to reveal a truth that has hitherto been concealed. Having warmed up his audience by inducing disgust about animal products – whereby eggs are described as 'hen's periods' and honey as 'bees' vomit' – Yourofsky issues a challenge. 'When you leave this room, you can choose to be radically kind – or you can stay radically cruel.' He then plays undercover footage of what he calls a 'ma and pa farm', where farm workers beat cows and their calves round the head with metal bars, pummel their faces and repeatedly punch their udders. 'We beat the fuck out of this cow,' one farm worker boasts. 'We stabbed her.' Another worker says that meting out violence to the cows felt so good that he just wanted 'to fucking keep on hitting them'. Having played this footage to his audience, Yourofsky tells his audience that he has not shown them an isolated incident but has shown them 'how slaves are treated'. He then underlines the complicity of the audience in what they have just watched, telling them that it happened because 'you want to eat what comes out of her [the cow's] body'. By the time Elliott had finished watching this speech on YouTube, he had undergone a rapid transformation from carnivore into vegan. In his subsequent work as an animal-rights activist, Elliott cited Yourofsky as a major inspiration in his content creation, spurring him to transmit his vegan message to others through his social media advocacy.

Elliott's conception of belief was expressed as linked to religion and standing in opposition to observable, empirical facts. When asked about whether he considered veganism to be a belief, he replied that he preferred not to refer to veganism as a belief system and instead thought of it as a 'moral obligation'. He explained this by saying that if a person thought it was wrong to slit a dog's throat, that person would not generally be considered to hold a belief system about dogs. He added that it saddened him to 'live in a world where we even have to have a word for [veganism] as if it is some kind of out-there philosophy, belief system or religious belief'. Elliott was then asked to consider whether the word belief had any particular connotations for him. He replied that he thought it could 'trivialise' the message that animal activists were trying to communicate to others. He noted how vegans were sometimes told that they were forcing their beliefs on others. His response was to say that it is not a belief that 'animals want to live and want to be free […] these are just facts'. Vegans, he said, were not trying to show others something that was not directly observable – unlike, say,

holding a belief in God or gods. 'We're not asking you to have faith in anything. We're not asking you to see or acknowledge anything that isn't there, that you can't see with your own eyes.' Rather than hold a belief about veganism, Elliott said that his veganism was 'a moral imperative'. Watching the *Best Speech* talk produced this moral imperative for Elliott, who later, through his activism, continued work to produce a vegan truth that challenges and subverts normative discourses about the consumption of animals. Three further examples of vegan truth-production are now presented: the Let's Eat Balanced campaign; the #februdairy hashtag; and the Cube of Truth events of activist group Anonymous for the Voiceless.

During January 2021, to coincide with plant-based food event Veganuary, the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) launched a £1.5 million advertising campaign called We Eat Balanced (later rebranded Let's Eat Balanced) to promote red meat and dairy. The AHDB's Let's Eat Balanced channel on YouTube featured a video, *Ordinary Food Is Good Enough*, depicting a teenage girl sitting on her bed and scrolling through social media, bombarded with messages about nutritional advice. Her mother called from downstairs to tell her dinner was ready and the girl joined her family at the table to be served a baked potato stuffed with beef chili and cheese, which the AHDB annotated to show how much calcium, protein, vitamin B12 and iron the meal contained. In response to this campaign, Plant Based News remade the advert and subverted meat and dairy as 'a food so brutal it steals calves from their mothers and the flesh of creatures we humans incarcerate' (Gilliver 2021b).

Truth claims about veganism also counter discursive constructions of the dairy industry. During fieldwork, I encountered the hashtag #februdairy, a social media campaign initiated in 2018 by a livestock consultant to counter vegan criticism of the dairy sector (Case 2020). It also sought to counter the popularity of the Veganuary campaign in January, as well as the burgeoning popularity of plant-based alternatives to dairy. By 2021, one in three Britons were drinking plant-based milk (Wood 2021), a trend that continued into 2022, when according to trade publication *The Grocer*, Britons were 'turning their backs on milk', in part owing to growing demand for plant-based

alternatives (Bamford 2022). During the #februdairy campaign, a pro-dairy supporter wrote on Facebook:

'Good bye #Veganuary and hello #Februdairy! So long to people pushing their lifestyles on you. Good riddance to closed-mindedness. And farewell to those who can't respect other people's choices […] Fear, shame, and hatred shouldn't flavour your food choices. I believe people should make decisions based on #factsnotfear.'

Another pro-dairy comment, posted using the #februdairy hashtag on YouTube and heavy with pro-Brexit sentiment, sought not only to attack vegans, but also to frame dairy consumption as a patriotic endeavour:

'Stop also this VEGAN/VEG environment scaring shite. Eat meat, drink milk, eat cheese, use butter, ALL British!!! NOT FRENCH, GERMAN, or any other EU deal. BUY BRITISH. MEAT, FRUIT, VEG.'

In response to pro-dairy messages such as these, vegan activists presented their own counter-discourses. For example, retweeting a farm vet's photo of a cow and its calf with a heart emoji and the #februdairy hashtag, a vegan posted:

'This mother and baby are absolutely stunning. It breaks my heart knowing that baby is going to be stolen away from her. Hugely distressing for both mother and baby who will have created a strong bond already. And for what? A glass of milk? Is it really worth it?'

Vegans' subversion of pro-animal agriculture campaigns, as shown above, seeks to counter mainstream discourses about animal agriculture and present an alternative truth of how animals are used for food. Tulloch and Judge (2018: 2-3) analyse anti-dairy video activism and examine the

common-sense understanding that bobby calves – unwanted calves that are culled for slaughter – are superfluous to the dairy industry and must be despatched humanely after birth has triggered lactation in the dairy cow, to suggest that these understandings of dairy cows and their bobby calves are discursively constructed. Discovering this construction can lead to moments of realisation for vegans, in which they unveil a vegan truth, such as learning about the lives and treatment of dairy cows. During the pilot fieldwork for this study, a YouTuber trying to enrich her understanding of veganism had a 'sudden realisation' that 'dairy is not intended for humans, it's intended for the baby calf' (Harding and Day 2021: 7). This echoes the words of Mark, already noted in *5.2 Awakening narratives*, who said that learning about dairy was an 'eye-opener' for him and that before becoming vegan, he thought cows were merely 'milk-producing machines' that ate grass, which then 'manifested itself in milk – I didn't know they had to be pregnant'.

Another illustration of how truth claims are employed by vegans is in the work of street outreach, where explicit images of animal suffering can be used to elicit a reaction from members of the public, in the hope of an uptake of vegans' ethical messages. Campaign group Anonymous for the Voiceless (AV) is known for its Cube of Truth events. On its website, it explains that at these events, its volunteers hold a device that plays 'graphic and powerful footage of animal exploitation', which can be seen by passers-by. This performative testimonial action presents a vegan truth. During fieldwork, I spoke to two activists who had participated in AV events: Jamie and Zach. Although Jamie did not volunteer with AV any more, he estimated that had had spent 'hundreds of hours' volunteering at AV events in the past. He said that these events tended to take place in city centres and comprised a group of activists gathering to form a square, facing outwards and holding either a sign saying TRUTH in capital letters or holding a screen showing farm and slaughterhouse footage. The activist event was akin to 'an art piece', said Jamie. Screens were held aloft by those in the Cube, while the volunteers, the 'outreachers', would circle the Cube. When a passer-by stopped to look at the Cube and watch what was happening on the screens, the outreachers would approach them and engage them in conversation. This conversation, said Jamie, was an appeal to the passer-by to think about the issue of animal rights and to encourage them to reach the conclusion that they 'should change

their behaviours so that they aren't contributing to these industries any more'. When Jamie was a volunteer, he had taken part in both parts of the event, both as silent masked Cube participant and talking outreacher. These outreachers, Jamie said, were encouraged to use the Socratic method, a question-and-answer procedure that employs refutation by counterexample (Freydberg 2020: 240). Jamie described this method as a form of teaching by asking questions, 'to get [passers-by] to get them to go down a channel that you want them to'. Questions could include 'have you seen footage like this before?' or 'how does this footage make you feel?'. Most people, said Jamie, would say the footage was 'horrible'. From here, the conversation could develop in various ways. Sometimes the passers-by were resistant to the message; other times, they would agree with the activists that they could see the moral arguments for veganism and would acknowledge their own contribution to animal suffering. However, Jamie conceded that while many people would be 'agreeable in the moment', they would walk away from the Cube: 'It just leaves their head and they don't really think about it again.'

Zach was also an ex-AV volunteer and recalled the signs in the Cube that read TRUTH. He said that in some events, passers-by would see this word and assume that the AV event was a religious one, rather than an animal-rights demonstration. He explained that the word truth in the context of an AV event concerned 'showing the truth of what happens to animals'. Similarly to Jamie, Zach described the Cube as 'art performance', with those standing in the Cube dressed in black wearing Guy Fawkes masks, holding screens or signs. The reason for this, Jamie said, was to pique the curiosity of the public so that they would approach the Cube, rather than the more conventional approach of activists approaching the public and handing out leaflets. When people were drawn in by the performance, he added, their curiosity was taken as a 'form of consent to have a conversation'. Like Jamie, Zach would ask questions using the Socratic method, asking the passer-by how the footage made them feel. Zach said that a 'negative emotion' would follow, to which he would say something like 'why do you think you might be feeling that way?'. I told Zach that I had seen online that AV activists used the term 'conversion' when they had received a positive response to their message in outreach. Zach, acknowledging what he called the 'quasi-religious' connotations of the term, said that AV did

not use this term any more, but that in the past, if an outreacher had felt that the passer-by had taken their message seriously, this 'conversion' could be counted as a way of measuring the impact of the event, which would later be posted on AV's website. The Cube of Truth is a testimonial action that produces a truth by eliciting affect, both in the display of footage and in the questioning of the public once they have been confronted with that footage, notably by asking passers-by how they feel. This, in turn, requests the receiver of the testimonial message to respond and to take responsibility for their actions. This vegan testimony is a relational, affective exchange between the vegan and their non-vegan other, with the vegan performing their truth to counter mainstream understandings of how animals are used for food.

Having presented examples of how activists work to produce a vegan truth, I now return to Miles, whose becoming-vegan story has already been employed to illustrate how, in becoming vegan, some individuals come to perceive that the world around them is an illusion that has prevented them from seeing and experiencing reality. In the previous chapter, I traced how vegans position themselves in relation to non-vegans. In discussing his activism, Miles positioned his non-religiosity and his veganism in relation to religion, carefully distancing veganism from religious belief. He said that his interpretation of religion was that all religions are 'human emotions codified'. He gave the example from the Bible: 'thou shalt not kill'. He said that this was 'just a normal human reaction to not killing another human being'. Thus, the sentiment did not stem from religion, but from humans, who 'layer religion over the top'. He also cited the example of ahimsa, the ethic of not causing harm to other living things found in Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. This, he said, followed the same principle: a human emotion codified as religion. Miles saw these principles as a 'rational thinking thing', whereby humans sought to avoid being killed by agreeing with other humans that they would not kill them. Veganism was thus a logical extension of this principle for Miles, extending it to all sentient animals, 'all the way down to molluscs […] anything that strives to move away from danger'. When asked later in the interview about whether he considered veganism to be a philosophical belief, Miles said emphatically that belief was 'a problematic word […] in that it imbues a sense of non-reality'. He viewed belief as something that was not real, as something that could be argued against. He stressed

that veganism could not be argued against, since it was a truth. He said: 'If you go back to where I stem from, which is do no harm, you can't say that it's my belief that it's wrong to murder […] I think believing that killing is wrong allows in the conversation that it's actually OK to believe it's right to kill. And I don't think it's right to kill.' When asked about his response to the religion question in the Census, Miles said that he would put atheist, but he found this difficult because it was still beholden to theism. He explained that 'the alpha is theism, the omega is atheism' and his preference was for non-belief to go first. At the end of the interview, unprompted by a question, he said that veganism was about taking responsibility for one's actions, rather than attributing them to God. He said: 'Veganism doesn't externalise responsibility.'

The stories of Mark, Miles and Elliott, discussed in this chapter and in the previous chapter, show how some participants roundly reject the notion of veganism as a belief. Instead, they communicate veganism as a fact – a truth – to others. Miles in particular underlines the importance of responsibility towards the non-human animal other. In becoming vegan, Miles regards himself as finding his own truth, not a truth that has been given to him through religious belief. The data in this chapter so far have illustrated how vegans can testify not to what they believe in but to what they regard as a truth. In this context, testimony is about taking responsibility for the truth of something that occurs (Felman and Laub 1992: 204). Bearing witness involves a public response (Zelizer 1998: 10), whether from a vegan's friends and family, or a public audience for testimony, in the form of activism.

The disaffection of Miles, and other vegans who transmit truth claims through their activism (see *5.2 Awakening narratives*) can perhaps be understood in a wider political context of disinformation and post-truth. In discussing the use of disinformation in political campaigns – such as the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the UK's referendum on leaving the European Union in the same year and, later in 2020, the spread of disinformation by conspiracy theorists about Covid-19 – Guest (2022: 68) suggests that the notion of an era of post-truth is credible and that post-truth is a social phenomenon that rejects truth claims based in established authority. Post-truth is a phenomenon in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and

personal belief (Fridlund 2020: 216). This definition stresses the significance of emotion, rather than that of objective fact, in shaping personal beliefs and public debates (Malcolm 2021: 1063-1064). As this relates to veganism, Gvion (2020: 570-572) shows how Israeli vegans have challenged evidence-based information that has been upheld by experts, instead disseminating vegan knowledge through the internet, thus creating a 'shift in the regime of knowledge'. Gvion argues that social media plays an important role in the post-truth phenomenon, as social media networks 'operate with their own internal truth criteria'. Thus, when vegans claim to have discovered the 'truth', access to information about this truth serves as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986a) within the wider vegan community. The promotion of vegan truth claims can be seen as a form of symbolic cultural capital that places vegans in a group of 'privileged and informed learners' who then disseminate this knowledge through social media (Oliver 2021: 572). Moreover, in bearing witness, and assuming responsibility for animals, vegans are engaged in what Tait (2011: 1220-1227, drawing on Felman and Laub 1992 and Oliver 2001; 2004) describes as the transmission of moral obligation, in which the appeal of the witness transcends the mere communication of facts – which I have articulated thus far as a vegan truth – and moralises the future action of the witness's audience. This point will be expanded further in the next section, while the significance of affect in acquiring and transmitting truth claims will be explored in more detail in *Chapter Seven: Veganism as a Practice of Affective Witnessing*.

6.3 Moralising the audience

The final section of this chapter turns to another aspect of how veganism is a performative act of bearing witness, by assessing in more detail how moral obligation is transmitted. In particular, it will show how some vegans seek to moralise the actions of non-vegan others and how this takes place in the context of hostile and vitriolic comments online. This reinforces a claim made already in this chapter, namely that vegan ethics are performed in relation to, and in anticipation of, conflict. The transmission of vegan morality is exemplified by a content creator I encountered watching YouTube during fieldwork. Canadian animal-rights activist Kadie Karen Diekmeyer, under the moniker That Vegan Teacher, employs affect to moralise her audience. In turn, she elicits a strong response from

audiences, with many of the comments accompanying her videos seeking to mock and discredit her ethical stance. She had reached 1.6 million followers on TikTok before she was banned from the platform in early 2021 for 'multiple community guideline violations', having made remarks in her videos about comparing animal agriculture to the Holocaust and for remarking that coming out as a vegan, 'as someone who cares beyond themselves', is 'more special' than coming out as gay (Gilliver 2021a). That Vegan Teacher later surfaced on YouTube, where she continued to produce controversial content, such as a song called *I Can't Breathe*, which was reported to have been composed the same day that George Floyd was killed in police custody (Kiley 2021) and drew criticism for co-opting the Black Lives Matter movement in the name of animal-rights activism. In a later video in November 2021, *Terrible Tragedy – Fan's Last Words Were 'I Can't Breathe'*, That Vegan Teacher attacked rapper Travis Scott as an 'animal abuser', owing to his brand collaboration with McDonald's. She added that Scott had recently watched the death of his fans at the Astroworld Festival, where ten people died in a crowd crush. Invoking memories of the death of George Floyd the year before – who had told Derek Chauvin, the officer kneeling on his neck for more than nine minutes, 'I can't breathe' – That Vegan Teacher said that the Astroworld crowd were 'packed so tightly together that they couldn't breathe', slowly enunciating the final two words for emphasis. Travis Scott was not the only target of That Vegan Teacher's provocations. In another video entitled *How Gordon Ramsay Is Like Hitler & How That Makes Me Cry*, she attacked celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay for amassing a fortune 'off the backs of innocent animals who have been murdered because of him'. She asked her audience to think of the Holocaust, which she suggested had 'never ended for the animals'. As she played footage of chicken processing plants, likening Ramsay to Hitler, she made appeals to her audience through tears as she watched footage of chicks being macerated, asking if these scenes looked any different from Auschwitz. In making comparisons between animal agriculture and the Holocaust, That Vegan Teacher employed affect to moralise her audience, not only through her tears but also in her choice of contentious, emotive focal points such as catastrophic public events, murder and genocide. Reading through the comments sections on her videos, it was evident that a sizeable number of respondents used her testimonial to ridicule her vegan message and appearance. In responses to her YouTube video from May 2021 entitled *VEGANPHOBIA*

NEEDS TO STOP, the video's comments included caustic attacks on not only her tearful appeals but also her presentation:

'You should change your attitude old lady'

'Ugly vegan people deserve to be made into burgers with extra cheese'

'I love when she crys [sic] and loses her little mind…'

Talking to participant Mark about That Vegan Teacher, his praise of her underlined how the style of her videos performatively linked eating animals with the oppression of animals. He described her as 'the ace card', an exemplar of how the vegan message had been successfully transmitted to a wide audience. He explained that even though non-vegans watched her 'cringey and uncool' content – such as her signature renditions of songs about veganism, which she sang while playing a ukulele – and mocked her vegan message, Mark noted that they heard the vegan message nonetheless. He said: 'That's her secret – she's very, very clever.' He regarded her content as 'cringey on purpose'. Although she was mocked for her appearance, or her ukulele songs, thousands of viewers still heard the word 'vegan'. As Mark said: 'They hear animals, they hear torture, they hear rape, they hear enslavement, they hear Holocaust. They hear all these words in a very short space of time.' As examples of vegan testimony, That Vegan Teacher's videos are liable to meet the incomprehension and indifference of those that watch them, as well as receive a hostile reception, but the testimony is nonetheless transmitted and its message is delivered for maximum impact.

Hostility towards vegans also occurs in the form of online trolling, a practice in which posts and comments deliberately provoke arguments or seek to arouse emotional reactions. An example is the barrage of anti-vegan comments on protest group Animal Rebellion's Facebook page. In a post from 6 September 2021, Animal Rebellion reported that the group had been targeted by the police following what it called its 'non-violent direct action for animals', a summer of activism that had

included blockading McDonald's distribution centres across the UK; dyeing the fountains outside Buckingham Palace blood red; and shutting down Arla, the UK's largest dairy factory, in Aylesbury. While some comments on their post were supportive, other comments were highly antagonistic. A thread about one of the activist events was notable for an onslaught of anti-vegan taunting in the comments. A detractor posted a torrent of animated gifs depicting McDonald's products, which flashed upon the screen one after the other: bun, patty, lettuce, sauce. This was followed by more animated gifs featuring pixelated images of meat, a figure dancing on top of a burger as fries rained down, and beef and melting cheese pouring out of a box. Another poster joined in with the gif-bombing – of dancing cartoon burgers, cats sat on burgers and giant burgers being carved up with a knife. The comments came thick and fast, alluding to vegan authoritarianism and perceived curbs on personal freedom:

'Here's an idea. Rather than alienating your cause, by being a bunch of pathetic

little Nazis, why don't you have a vegan pride parade...'

'Why don't you lot just fuck off and let us meat eaters get on with our lives, oh and

by the way if you put as much effort into finding a job the better part of society

wouldn't have to put up with your self-righteous crap…'

'You guys have violent fascistic minds and you're akin to Hitler, except worse...

He was merely vegetarian…'

While the comments in response to That Vegan Teacher on the previous page can be regarded as an example of what Sobieraj (2018: 1700) has termed extreme hostility in the form of digital sexism, which sees aggressors employ intimidation, shaming and discrediting to limit the impact of women in digital public spaces, anti-vegan comments such as those above also show how bearing witness, and the transmission of moral obligation, is an arduous task. In part, this is because social media platforms can be sites in which individuals seek to disrupt the communication of their chosen

enemies (Polak and Trottier 2020: 11-13). When a vegan transmits moral obligation through their activist content, there is a risk that their testimony will not prevent further trauma for animals nor avert the further suffering or exploitation of animals in the future. When a response to vegan testimony mocks and discredits its ethical message – such as the response of 'burgers and extra cheese' – the vegan's transmission of moral obligation is potentially an unsuccessful endeavour.

In the final section of this chapter, I have shown some of the ways in which vegans, in their response to trauma, engage in the transmission of moral obligation and how they can seek to moralise their audience. The reception of moral obligation can often be met with hostility and vitriol. Bearing witness can carry a number of risks, such as the possibility that testimony will not be heard by others (Tait 2011: 1220-1227). Such activism, as shown in the example of Animal Rebellion's Facebook page, can be laborious, entailing a certain amount of 'emotion work' (Jacobsson and Lindblom 2013: 55, following Hochschild 1983). In the transmission of moral obligation, a vegan activist may try to evoke sympathy and compassion from their audience. However, their ethical message may be misunderstood; met with indifference; or, at worst, met with vitriol. The communication of vegan belief not only responds to trauma (of animal suffering) but also responds to the hearer of the ethical message and their potentially hostile reaction to receiving the message. In this exchange, vegans ask others to share responsibility for what they regard as atrocity, while creating possibilities for action so that these atrocities are not repeated. It exemplifies Oliver's (2001: 15-16) conception of subjectivity, emerging from the process of witnessing as response-ability, which seeks the possibility of response. In this context, the non-vegan is asked to respond to the vegan witness. Through the appeal for the audience to share responsibility, eliciting affect may lead to the audience being moralised and taking action (Tait 2011: 1233).

Theorising the social labour of testimonial acts and their reception by audiences, Kurasawa (2007: 24-53) uses an 'action-theoretical framework' to argue that bearing witness comprises five interrelated tasks: voice against silence (if the message is never received); interpretation against

incomprehension (if the message cannot be deciphered); empathy against indifference (if the message is read but then discarded); remembrance against forgetting (if the message is distorted or erased over time); and prevention against repetition (if the message does not avert future suffering). He explains how the cultivation of empathy among testimonial audiences is used by human-rights activists to combat indifference to distant suffering, yet the framework can be usefully applied to understanding the work of animal-rights advocacy, whereby activists seek to address indifference to what they see as the injustice of animal suffering. Kurasawa also regards witnessing as a dialogical process between two parties – eyewitnesses and their audiences – who are tasked respectively with the labour of response and address. In this testimonial performance, the audience must respond to the appeal of the addressee, their roles bonded by mutual recognition. Kurasawa acknowledges that his model of witnessing departs from Kelly Oliver (2001: 15-16), who sees witnessing as not merely recognition, but response-ability, which requires the testimonial audience to respond rather than merely recognise. However, his theorisation of the labour of bearing witness (2007: 33) and his description of bearing witness as a mode of politically directed social action is helpful to analyse vegans' performative acts of testimony. Performances of veganism, as a mode of social action, are similarly politically directed, demanding a response from those who are addressed.

This chapter has shown how the ethical practice of veganism is an act of bearing witness in which the vegan witness, having confronted animal suffering, performs a response to this trauma. Furthermore, the vegan is formed and sustained in their relation to the non-vegan other, who in turn is tasked with receiving, responding to and acting upon the message of the vegan's testimony. Facing a potentially hostile reception to this message, the testimonial actions of vegans perform a vegan truth. The next chapter moves from discussions of performative bearing witness to consider veganism as a practice of affective witnessing (Richardson and Schankweiler 2020) and as an affective and critical practice (Ibrahim 2020: 491) that centres encounter, embodiment and intensities of experience.

7 Veganism as a Practice of Affective Witnessing

7.1 A background to affective witnessing

In the previous chapter, I proposed that veganism is a performative act of bearing witness: a mode of social action whereby the 'doing' of veganism is shaped significantly by the vegan's relation to their non-vegan other. In this chapter, I will expand on the affective aspects of vegan witnessing. This is done in two ways. Firstly, I consider how activist Lisa embodies the concept of affective witnessing (Richardson and Schankweiler 2020) by tracing the relationality between human and non-human bodies in her story of becoming vegan. Secondly, I observe how vegan content creators talk about the 'vegan bubble' – an online space akin to an echo chamber – and analyse the efficacy of their testimonial labours using Ahmed's (2004b: 4) concept of 'sticky' affect. Drawing from diverse strands of affect theory, I show that vegan testimony is not only performative, but also that affect is central to the performative power of the vegan witness.

Before presenting the data outlined above, it is important to evaluate the aspects of affect theory that support the conception of vegan witnessing as a dynamic, relational process in which the circulation of affect plays a significant role. Affect can be considered as a social energy in which subjects are continually and contingently brought into being (Supp-Montgomerie 2015: 336). Affect theory's emphasis on non-linguistic experience is highly relevant to the ways in which vegans are affected by the lives and deaths of animals. Affect theory can be employed to analyse the interplay of human and animal lifeworlds, particularly interactions that operate beyond language (Schaefer 2017: 15-18). Moreover, vegan witnessing communities are bound by affect's social energy. Durkheim's (1912) work on religion can be viewed as a precursor to affect theory (O'Neill 2013: 1103), particularly its emphasis on relationality. Durkheim tended to link emotion with the collective rather than the individual (Pickering 2008: 442-447), proposing that feelings do not emerge from individual bodies, but rather that they bind together social bodies collectively (Ahmed 2004b: 9). A contemporary example is that of internet communities, which are held together by what Slaby and Von Scheve (2019: 5-7) call affective resonance, a concept similar to Durkheim's collective effervescence, in which online movements bond in solidarity in highly affective ways (Papacharissi 2015).

While a general turn to affect across the social sciences and humanities has taken place over the past two decades (Clough 2007; Greco and Stenner 2008; Gregg and Seigworth 2010), the employment of affect theory to analyse religious phenomena is a relatively recent development (Kluchin 2017: 242). Although religion and emotion have received scholarly attention (for example Corrigan 2008 and 2018; Riis and Woodhead 2012), the application of affect theory to religious phenomena is somewhat underdeveloped, with the notable exception of Schaefer's *Religious Affects* (2015), which attempts to address the lacuna between affect theory and religious studies scholarship. While Riis and Woodhead (2012: 20-22) acknowledge that social life is a 'force field of emotional energies' – echoing Gregg and Seigworth's (2010: 3) description of affect as forces, or intensities – they contend that the word 'affect' suggests the passive and reactive dimensions of emotion. However, many affect studies are careful to distinguish affect – as something preconscious and pre-liminal – from emotion as a social expression (Watkins 2010: 269). As this chapter will show, affective witnessing is not passive. While vegans react to, and are affected by, what they regard as injustices against animals, they also seek to affect others by creating spaces of relation between human and non-human worlds.

Theories of affect are diverse, which presents challenges in their application. Scholars have approached affect, emotion and feeling in sometimes contradictory ways, and affect theory encompasses a range of approaches that are diverse in their theoretical orientation (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015: 4). In his translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brian Massumi (1987: xvi) notes that *l'affect*, Spinoza's *affectus*, is the ability to affect and be affected, a 'prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act'. While feelings can be seen as sensations that are labelled in relation to previous experiences, then projected and displayed as an emotion, affect is a non-conscious moment that is not realised in language (Shouse 2005). Put another way, affect can be described as referring to states of being, rather than the way in which they manifest, and are interpreted, as emotions (Hemmings 2005: 551). Massumi (2002: 26-27) distinguishes between affect and emotion, arguing that affect is something that can be felt

but for which one has no words, as opposed to emotions, which can be named and contained. While affect is similar to feeling and emotion, it is more concerned with the body than either feeling or emotion, occurring before both consciousness and discourse (O'Neill 2013: 1095). Scholarly work on affect has claimed to tap into a sensual realm that cannot be accessed through discourse or cognition (Wetherell 2012: 52), yet affect can also be a 'slippery' concept that resists being named and quantified as an emotion of feeling (Kluchin 2017: 242).

To complicate matters further, scholars have taken different approaches in treating affect in the singular and affects in the plural (see Schaefer 2015: 36-59 for a discussion). Theorists that speak of affects rather than affect (for example, Ahmed 2004b and Berlant 2011) tend to make less of a distinction between affects and emotions. Before discussing the 'vegan bubble' as an object of sticky affect later in this chapter, it is important to acknowledge Ahmed's theoretical position concerning emotions and how this departs with accounts of affect already discussed in this chapter. Affect theory can be thought of as dividing into two branches, with one branch broadly following Deleuze's framework, which makes a distinction between affect – in the singular – from emotions (Schaefer 2018: 77). However, Ahmed (2010a: 30) does not regard affect, in the singular, as having autonomy or if, indeed, affect is even an object of study. In a critique of Hardt's (2007) preface to *The Affective Turn*, Ahmed (2004b: 206-208) argues that feminist scholarship and feminist theories of emotion have long challenged mind-body dualisms and created a space in which to rethink the relation between mind and body – an argument later elaborated by Fischer (2016: 815), who notes that feminist work theorised emotions long before the scholarly turn to affect. Significantly, Ahmed contends that the affective turn has privileged affect over emotion. Instead, Ahmed works with emotion as a concept, regarding affect and emotion as similar aspects of experience rather than separating them as concepts. Critiquing the Deleuzian strand of affect, Ahmed (2004a: 39) argues that the analytical distinction between affect, in the singular, and emotions carries the risk of isolating emotions from lived experience, namely 'of being and having a body'. Thus, following Ahmed, if affects are used in the plural, then they can be employed interchangeably with emotions (Schaefer

2018: 77). However, what unites these varied approaches is their emphasis on relationality, which is crucial to this chapter's theme of affective vegan witnessing.

Kelly Oliver's rethinking of identity based on recognition was introduced in *Chapter Four: The Witness* and her (2001: 15-16) positioning of witnessing as that which invites the possibility of response has been used throughout the empirical chapters thus far to develop the figure of the vegan as witness. Her intersubjective, affective interpretation of witnessing also underlines the data that follows in this chapter. Oliver (2001: 143) proposes that her theory of witnessing challenges the traditional notion of vision – namely, seeing with one's own eyes – and stresses the importance of three aspects of this theory. Firstly, the witness is testifying to something that cannot be seen, which makes a distinction from what is seen by an eyewitness. Secondly, the addressee of the witness responds to the performative element of testimony, the 'unseen of history'. Thirdly, the process of witnessing testifies not to facts but to 'a commitment to the truth of subjectivity as address-ability and response-ability'. She continues (2001: 196-197) that this subjectivity should respond to the psychic and affective energy that connects human beings to each other and the world around them, as well as 'other animal species'. Here, she references Brennan (1997), who argues that social pressure operates as physical energy, and that social forces are material forces, drawing from Durkheim's (1912) idea of social energy as an 'electricity' from when people are gathered together, an analysis of religious experience that explores how social energy operates as physical energy. Oliver (2015: 476-489) also relates witnessing and response ethics to an ethics that is grounded in a shared bond to the Earth, which requires turning away from human beings' shared vulnerability and instead regarding each other as 'earthlings' who 'respond to the call of others and our shared environments'. She expands the notion of witnessing to include non-human animals – later developed in *Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us to be Human* (2009) – which moves beyond 'human centrism' and towards a consideration of how all 'creatures of the earth' respond. Elsewhere, Oliver contends (2010: 268-275) that rather than consider the ways in which non-human animals are like humans, there is a need to develop an ethics that extends obligations to those 'who are not like us […] an ethics based on sameness is not enough'.

This chapter will argue that vegan witnessing is affective. Richardson and Schankweiler (2020: 237-238) propose that affective witnessing is a relational account of witnessing that centres embodiment and affect, which is often encountered through media, but not reducible to it. They draw from Spinoza's *Ethics* to understand affect as the capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies, human and non-human, thus shifting the emphasis from the figure of the witness to the idea of witnessing as an 'intensive encounter'. Spinoza's work on affects – in which he proposed that the greater individuals' power to be affected, the greater individuals' power to act – has influenced much contemporary affect scholarship (Hardt 2007: ix-x). Massumi (2015: 3-4), noting how Spinoza talks of the body in terms of its capacity for affecting or being affected, argues that these two different capacities 'always go together', so that when a person affects something, they are at the same time opening themselves up to being affected in turn. Crucially, the capacity to affect or be affected is relational, since affect happens in the in-between space of affecting and being affected (Massumi 2015: 91). Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677), particularly when interpreted via Deleuze, sees affect characterised as a relational ontology; an interplay of affecting and being affected; and a dynamic understanding of power (Slaby and Mühlhoff 2019: 28, following Deleuze 1988). As Bens (2020: 274) notes, a number of approaches in affect theory connect to Spinoza, particularly *Ethics* and how he has been subsequently interpreted by Deleuze. Bens adds that bodies in a Spinozan sense are not only biological bodies, but also include other non-humans, thus producing an analytical approach that is 'consistently relational'. Thus, proposes Bens, the witness can be thought of as 'a body that affects and is affected by other bodies'.

I will begin by employing Richardson and Schankweiler's (2020: 237-238) work on affective witnessing to develop the central role of affect to vegan witnessing. This analytical framework locates four perspectives – encounter, embodiment, affect and intensities of experience. It also draws on Gregg and Seigworth's (2010: 3) description of affect as a force of encounter that dissolves the boundaries between bodies and their understanding of affect as the dynamic relationality of bodies. This perspective emphasises affective witnessing as an intensive encounter between bodies. I develop this framework in the context of my work to describe the intensive encounter of a human

body with the bodies of other animals. Vegan witnessing is a process that is both felt and that involves the whole body, while simultaneously triggering the relationality of a body to other bodies. Building on the work of *Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness*, in which participants described the process of becoming vegan by employing connective metaphors, this chapter will show how relationality connects human and animal bodies. I move from a discussion of theory to an exemplary case – an activist named Lisa – and interpret her encounters with animals in her childhood and adolescence as intense experiences that orient her towards not only becoming vegan but also, through affective forces, becoming a vegan witness in which she takes action to avert the future suffering of animals.

7.2 Lisa: an affective witness

Lisa's story of becoming and being vegan emphasises her encounter with non-human worlds, embodiment and intensities of experience. Moreover, her position as affective witness demonstrates an intense relationality between her own body, the bodies of other animals and the worlds that they inhabit. In telling the story of how she became vegan, she described her childhood as being marked by an affinity with 'other animals', which she said she felt from an early age. The use of the word 'other' is significant, as it establishes her human position as being contiguous with non-human animals. This connection with animals was something she said she did not know how to describe but was felt deeply as care, compassion and protectiveness. Her admission that she did not know how to describe this connection in words is affective in that it is non-linguistic; it is, as Schaefer (2017: 15-18) puts it, in excess of language. Lisa also said that from an early age, she had always hated eating meat, then corrected herself to say 'so-called meat', again creating a space of relation between the flesh of a human and the flesh of an animal. She found eating it a chore and was affected by the flesh of a dead animal even without fully understanding what it was and why she was required to eat it at the family dining table. Eventually, she made a link between the 'so-called meat' on her plate and the lambs she loved to watch on family car trips to the countryside. Then one day, sitting down to a family meal, Lisa saw lamb chops on her plate and she asked her family if these were the lambs she had seen in the countryside. Her parents confirmed that the lamb on her plate was the same animal that she had watched in the countryside. On receiving this information, Lisa

said that 'my world just kind of changed and fell apart'. The affective force was profound. In a deeply relational witnessing moment, she was affected by the force of other bodies, the bodies of lambs, orienting her towards a future in which she eventually became a vegan and, in turn, came to affect others through her activism. Following this encounter, Lisa stopped eating meat and became vegetarian, along with a friend. At this time, she was a young teenager and did not know much about vegetarianism, let alone veganism. She was unaware of any philosophy about not eating animals; she simply knew, by the force of her encounter with the lamb, that she did not want to eat animals any more. This encounter is, I argue, a moment of affective witnessing that triggers the relationality of her body to the body of the lamb.

A second example of an affective witnessing moment was experienced by Lisa when she was 16 or 17. She was in the town centre with her friends and came across an activist stall with graphic images of animal testing. Prior to this encounter, she had never seen images of vivisection before and when she saw the stall she was, she said, moved to a sensation of grief. Relating the ways in which she was affected, she described what happened as a sensation of horror, sadness and sorrow that 'overtook' her, a grief that she could not explain and with which she still lived with daily. In much the same way as she could not find words to describe her early childhood connection with animals, Lisa stressed the inadequacy of language to convey the pain for what she witnessed. When the anti-vivisection activists delivered their testimony, it was received by Lisa as an affective force that drove her to affect others. She became an animal-rights activist herself, becoming involved in outreach, protests and writing letters to MPs. As time went on and she became more involved in animal-rights campaigns, Lisa learned about the dairy and egg industries, which led to her becoming vegan. She said that being vegetarian for ethical reasons because of her respect and compassion for animals, while still being complicit in the dairy and egg industries, 'didn't sit right' with her. While she had described becoming vegan in terms of connections, such as linking the lamb chops to the lambs in the countryside, here she articulated a disconnect, an affective charge that pushed her away from dairy and egg consumption. As connection bonded her to animals, the disconnect of still supporting

exploitation through eating dairy and eggs was felt affectively and later prompted Lisa to become vegan.

I asked Lisa whether there were any flashpoints she could remember on the journey towards becoming vegan that stood out for her – particular 'confrontations', or 'things fitting into place', as I termed it. Lisa's replies suggested a space of relation whereby she was affected by animals, which drove her to affect others through her activism. She reiterated her longstanding resistance to eating meat. She called it 'flesh' and said that when she was a child, she felt as though she was being forced to eat it. Even before she made the decision to become vegetarian, she said she 'knew who I was eating'. Her use of the word 'who' rather than 'what' is significant here, as it performatively emphasises the relationality between the sentience of Lisa and the sentience of the animals she was forced to eat. However, she said she still had to eat animals nonetheless, since she was not aware of an alternative to doing so. This prompted an anxiety about eating flesh, while also carrying the burden of what she described as a love for, and bond with, every other animal who she would see, meet or hear. This anxiety can be understood as what Gregg and Seigworth (2010: 1) describe as an affective intensity that passes from body to body. It was not just the texture of the flesh that she had to endure: she was affected by a wider sensory process that encompassed the sight and sound of the animal, which lived in Lisa's happy memories but was also presented to her on her dinner plate. Such intensities were also felt in the fictional depictions of animals that Lisa watched as a child. She said that watching the films *Bambi* and *Watership Down* provoked the same anger, sorrow and grief that she would later feel when encountering the anti-vivisection stall, a grief that could not be overcome or lessened in its impact, because she would have to expose herself to other forms of animal suffering repeatedly in her work as an activist. Even now, Lisa said she found it difficult to watch *Watership Down* or even hear the soundtrack. It made her angry about humanity and its use of animals, an anger that had coursed through Lisa from a young age.

Another childhood memory surfaced at this point in the conversation. Lisa recalled an incident from her childhood, of coming home from school at the age of around six or seven and seeing a boy chopping up bees on the side of the road. She was horrified at what he was doing and described the impulse of wanting to stop him. She remembered the feeling of anger and grief inside her, imagining what the bee was experiencing. Incidents such as these position Lisa as the figure of the vegan witness, whose human body is intensely affected by non-human animal bodies. Grief marked her childhood and adolescent encounters with animals, which compelled Lisa to act upon injustice through her activism. In the late 1980s, before the existence of social media, Lisa would type out letters to members of parliament, or meet with other animal-rights activists to collaborate on campaigns. She would run stalls, collect signatures on petitions, go on marches, raise funds and talk to people in the street. Following her intensive witnessing encounters through childhood and adolescence, Lisa became a witness, responding to trauma by acting on behalf of animals. This exemplifies what Oliver (2004: 80) calls response-ability and Lisa's story shows the powerful affective dimensions of witnessing as action.

Lisa's account of becoming and being vegan also demonstrates the affective force between her body and the bodies of other animals, where multiple worlds converge. While the earlier part of our conversation had traced Lisa's anger and grief, it later developed into an account of Lisa's care of animals, her respect for their autonomy and her deep connection with them. For example, she described the actions of one of the cats she lived with. She did not describe the cat as a pet, as this is considered supremacist language by some vegans (Casamitjana 2022), but rather as 'one of the little furry ones who lives with me'. Just before our conversation, the cat had found a spider in the house and was attempting to chase and kill it. To protect the spider, Lisa used a device that caught the spider so that it could be transported safely to her garden. These sorts of incidents, said Lisa, happened every day: windows were opened to let flies escape the house and mosquitoes were rescued so that they would not be squashed. If a bug landed on Lisa, she would not swat it away, but instead look at it with curiosity and fascination, trying to imagine the lifeworld of the bug and attempting to inhabit it. Such encounters were practised through deep care and attention. For Lisa,

the encounters were moments of being open to beauty and wonder in the world around her, a flourishing connection to nature in which her body encountered other animal bodies and other worlds. However, this connection was not straightforwardly harmonious. She said that the hardest thing about being a vegan and an activist was trying to straddle two worlds. One world was a space of caring and compassion, in which every living being on the planet would receive justice. The other world was marked by atrocities committed by humans, particularly those committed against animals. Navigating these two worlds was hard for Lisa. While she tried to practise empathy, she said she despaired at the actions of some humans and that there were times when she felt that if she had a 'red button for humanity', she would press it 'in the blink of an eye'. She loved humans on an individual basis, such as her friends and family. Yet to think of humanity collectively provoked frustration, anger, disappointment and shame. This shame made her feel as though she did not want to identify as a human, because of what humans were doing to the planet and to other animals. These feelings were a difficult part of her day-to-day life, Lisa said, and consequently she felt as though she carried a weight on her shoulders that pushed her down.

Lisa bears witness with her whole body and the pre-conscious force of affect connects her to not only the bodies of other animals, but also to the atrocities committed by other human beings. Lisa's story vividly demonstrates veganism as a practice of affective witnessing, whereby affect happens as intensities circulate between bodies (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 1) in the relational encounter between humans and other animals. Her story has been presented here to argue that veganism is a performative act of bearing witness, where the suffering of animals is translated into action that seeks to avert further suffering. Vegan witnessing is also intensely affective, which underlines its performative power. The next section builds on this argument by considering vegan testimony through the lens of 'sticky' affect.

7.3 'Sticky' affect and the vegan bubble

Having considered Lisa's story as an example of affective witnessing, this chapter now turns to consider how vegans are engaged in the successful communication of their testimonial labour. A topic of conversation that arose with Lisa and other content creators I spoke to was that of the 'vegan bubble', an online space akin to the echo chamber effect, in which members of online communities reflect and reinforce each other's viewpoints and perspectives (Guo et al 2020). Affect theory will be employed to think productively about the vegan bubble and how emotions adhere to individual and collective bodies, including in vegan digital content. I will show how affect 'sticks' to individual and collective bodies in vegan activist content, while also examining how vegan testimonial messages can become 'stuck' in the vegan bubble and potentially fail to transmit vegans' ethical messages to non-vegans.

Employing the figure of the bubble to consider it as a 'sticky' affective object draws on Ahmed (2004b: 4), who discusses how emotions circulate and how they 'stick' to individual and collective bodies. In turn, this brings social objects and relations into being (Wetherell 2012: 155). Ahmed treats affect as 'what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects' (2010b: 29). To think of vegan affect as sticky builds on Ahmed's (2004b: 91) idea of stickiness as relationality, what she calls a 'with-ness' in which elements are adhered together. This with-ness is crucial to seeing vegans as affective witnesses. In fieldwork, participants talked in ways that strongly suggested that, for them, affects moved between their own bodies, other human bodies and the bodies of non-human animals. In some of their stories, they described certain sensations that 'stuck'. Take, for example, the story of Nicolas, already discussed in *Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness*, in which he recalled how his friend had talked about the 'bad energy' of eating another animal. This is a witnessing moment, as it propels Nicolas towards becoming vegan. The 'bad energy' of eating animal flesh sticks with him and, in his words, 'hits' him with force. Earlier in this chapter, Lisa experienced disconnect when her realisation of being complicit in the dairy and egg industries 'just didn't sit right'. This is echoed with Nicolas, who connects his body with other animal bodies, then

feels a disconnect as he contemplates the consumption of those animal bodies. (The juxtaposing themes of connection and disconnection are discussed in more detail later in this section.)

A similarly affective force was described by two other interlocutors, Jamie and Hannah. Jamie related a significant moment he had experienced as an undergraduate, when he was studying abroad as part of his degree course. He described how he was living in an accommodation block in which the staff had what he called a 'laissez-faire sort of approach' where they were not strict with the terms and conditions of the tenancy agreement. Because of this, one of the students that Jamie was living with had a dog, despite rules stating that students were not allowed to keep animals in the accommodation block. Jamie, who was 20 at the time, said it was the first time he had 'significantly interacted with any animal […] the only animals I would have really interacted with would have been pet animals'. Being allergic to cat and dog hair, he tended to avoid such animals, but then found himself in a situation where he was 'forced to interact' with a dog. Jamie said that he subsequently cultivated a relationship with the dog. One day, when Jamie was cooking in the kitchen, he formed a strong connection between the dog and the food that he was preparing. He said that he was cooking pork meatballs and the dog entered the kitchen. He bent down to play with the dog for a moment, then when he returned to cooking the meatballs, 'something just sort of clicked in my head'. He said it was the first time that he had recognised that the food he was eating was 'another animal', which he linked to the dog he had started to form a connection with. In that moment, he came to regard the pig and the dog as 'exactly the same'. After this realisation, this moment of linking, Jamie said he 'just changed then and there'. He went to the supermarket, bought plant-based foods, moved all the animal produce in his fridge to a flatmate's fridge and 'that was about it'.

Another participant who connected dog and pig in her journey towards veganism was Hannah. An ultrarunner, she had been introduced to the idea of plant-based diets through books, namely Christopher McDougall's *Born to Run* and *Finding Ultra* by endurance athlete Rich Roll. This piqued her interest and led her to watching documentaries such as *Cowspiracy*. She said: 'I have a dog too,

so it was kind of like, why is it OK for this stuff to happen to a cow or a pig […] it would break my heart if it happened to my dog. So it was like a slow, putting all that together, I would say probably it happened over the course of six months.' She said that through watching animal-rights documentaries, she was able to 'make the connection of […] how [the animal] gets on my plate'. In connecting her love for her dog with imagining how much her dog would suffer if it were killed for food, Hannah came to connect other animal species together and made the choice not to consume them. In the stories of Jamie and Hannah, which share similarities with the narratives of connection already presented in *Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness*, interlocutors regard 'food' and 'pet' species as having equal value. The realisation of this value eventually propels them towards the action of becoming vegan. Affect, in these accounts, passes between human bodies and non-human worlds, what Ahmed (2010b: 30) calls a 'drama of contingency' in which individual bodies are touched by whatever other individual bodies they are close to. Affect, and the way that it sticks, is a vital component of vegan witnessing.

In *Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness*, I proposed that vegan testimonies, particularly those that are performed online, are shaped significantly by conflict. I will expand this argument here and in the next chapter to suggest that vegan testimony is also shaped to a large extent by harnessing the affective power of the message the testimony carries. Affect is something that sticks in vegan testimony; sometimes, this stickiness is marked by conflict. Conflict was a salient feature of my online fieldsite, circulating both between vegans and non-vegans, and between vegans themselves. Conflict stuck everywhere, leaving its traces in hostile comments, combative response videos and the flow of argumentative words in livestream chat boxes. The emotions generated through conflict adhered to vegan testimonies online, sticking to vegans individually and vegans collectively as a community. I have previously suggested that vegans form and sustain their ethical choices in a context of conflict, a relational process by which vegan beliefs and values are shaped in relation to non-vegans' opposition to them. This is a performative act of bearing witness; it is also a process of affective witnessing.

While conflict can generate stickiness to vegan testimony, it is important to note that the stickiness of online content is not a new concept. Even before the advent of 'web 2.0' social media in the 2000s, in the late 1990s internet portals such as Yahoo! or Alta Vista used sticky content to try and keep visitors using the portal, so they would look at the banner ads (Stamps 1999), which was part of an emerging attention economy in which attention was conceptualised as property (Goldhaber 1997). In the present attention economy of the 2020s, some YouTube content creators have found that creating content that privileges conflict can lead to better visibility on the platform – where watch time is a priority – to increase advertising revenues. As alleged by former YouTube algorithm engineer Guillaume Chaslot (Lewis 2018), conflict can be harnessed to encourage users to spend more time online. The YouTube algorithm's success is measured by its success in convincing a user to watch another video after the first video has finished; if this process is successful, the algorithm learns that there is a positive relationship between the video that has been watched and the video that has been suggested (Bryant 2020: 86). Conflict, then, can create stickiness, keeping viewers coming back for more content and more advertising.

Certainly, I considered conflict to be a sticky affective presence in my online fieldsite. I mentioned this to YouTuber Amanda as we talked about vegan activism on social media, telling her that sometimes I would type 'vegan' into YouTube and it would not automatically direct me to vegan content but often suggest content that was hostile towards veganism. I found that some video titles stuck veganism to conflict, suggesting an adherent quality in their liberal use of sensationalist capital letters and exclamation marks. This adherence can attract viewers to stick to the platform and watch videos that promise further conflict. One such YouTube search – in which I typed 'vegan gets slapped', after talking with Amanda about a provocative title she had used for one of her videos – was notable for its use of the Karen trope. The Karen is a figure who signifies white privilege in internet culture (Williams 2020: 2), usually operationalised through the depiction of an interfering, easily offended middle-aged woman. Video titles in my search results featured promises of aggression and brought vegans into opposition with hostile non-vegans:

'Vegan Karens GET PUNCHED ON CAMERA'

'That Vegan Teacher KEEPS GETTING TROLLED By Gordon Ramsay!'

'This Guy Eats MEAT At A VEGAN Protest'

'Barbecuing Hot Dogs at an Animal Rights Protest'

'Vegetarian gets slapped with a steak'

'Vegan Karens Get DESTROYED ON CAMERA'

My fieldwork employed affect as a form of expressive learning and participation (Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013: 34) in which I felt affected by the impulse and contagion (Stewart 2007: 1-2) that coursed through flows of comments that accompanied vegans' digital content. This included a compulsion to follow the conflict that unfolded on my screen. While I had started fieldwork with the intention to 'follow' (Marcus 1995; Burrell 2009) philosophical belief as an object, my interviews with vegans led me to follow conflict in the field and trace its significance in the process of becoming and being vegan. When talking about the prevalence of conflict in vegan content with activist Amanda, we discussed a video that she had made for her YouTube channel, which she 'clickbaited' – meaning that she sought to attract viewers to click on the hyperlink to her video – by putting the word 'slapped' in the title, in capital letters with an exclamation mark. No slapping actually took place in the video: it had simply featured Amanda engaging in street outreach and defending herself against a woman who was angry with Amanda's animal-rights activism, but was not physically violent towards her. Amanda said that of all the videos on her channel, this video easily attracted the most views. This suggests that the YouTube algorithm prioritises conflict, leading to increased engagement and visibility (Cotter 2022: 10-11). Specific to vegan witnessing, the video title's promise of conflict shows the affective power of a testimonial message and how affect can potentially carry the message beyond the vegan bubble to a wider non-vegan audience.

By thinking of the vegan bubble in 'sticky', affective terms, I am highlighting how the arguably more-recognised term of echo chamber is relevant to vegans in their practices of affective witnessing. The use of the word 'bubble' is generative. As a noun, and in the sense that Lisa and other vegans used it in conversations during fieldwork, a bubble comprises a group of people who are seemingly unaware or unaffected by what is going on outside of the bubble. It was also a term that was used with more frequency during the period of fieldwork, when people slowly emerged from the restrictions of Covid-19 lockdowns and the 'support bubbles' that they were asked to form at the height of these restrictions, to limit contact with others and help restrict the spread of the virus. In its use as a verb, bubbling suggests a certain liveliness, or rapid movement. One can bubble with feelings – with excitement, with ideas – or feelings and activities can bubble away. Sometimes, these feelings bubble over, resistant to being contained. While the notion of the vegan bubble can imply a safe space for activists – in the sense of being in one's own bubble, surrounded by like-minded people – it can also suggest a feeling of enclosure and entrapment. The vegan bubble can be a fractious place in which vegans are locked into conflict with each other. It is in this conflict that the testimonial message, directed towards vegans, is at risk of being diluted or even ignored. In theorising the tasks and perils of testimonial practices, Kurasawa (2009: 92-97) uses poet Paul Celan's (2001) allegory of a poem as a message in a bottle that is sent with the hope that it will wash up on land and its message will be deciphered. For Kurasawa, the act of bearing witness requires the addressee to read the message, make sense of it and to prevent the reoccurrence of suffering. Vegans in fieldwork talked about the task of bearing these testimonial messages in different ways. Some lived in a vegan bubble by choosing to have only vegan friends, thus bypassing the possibility of having to associate with people who might eat animals or use animal products. Others raised concern at the ways in which invisible algorithms on social media platforms would lead them to content that the algorithm thought they would like, or agree with, thus reinforcing their existing beliefs. The algorithm can be considered as sticky: it sticks like-minded with like-minded and forecloses the possibility of being open to new ways of thinking about the world. It sticks vegans together yet also presents a risk that the testimonial message risks being stuck in the bubble.

In interviews, vegan content creators talked about the anxieties of in-fighting among vegans and how they felt affected by the toxicity that coursed through comments sections. Some content creators were aware of social media algorithms' role in seemingly privileging content that caused a reaction, either positive or negative. This shows how the algorithm has an affective force, with the power to provoke or trigger others. The outcome can shock the receiver of a testimonial message into taking action to avert the future suffering of animals; conversely, the algorithm can, in its stickiness, generate effects that are detrimental to the testimonial message, such as in-fighting, or hostility towards vegans on social media. Some content creators I spoke to said that any form of engagement with their content was positive – even just pressing the 'like' button would help towards raising engagement with vegan content. One YouTube activist I interviewed said that it was not important if viewers did not like content on his channel. In one of his videos, he said he was being attacked by slaughterhouse workers, which led to lots of views and several farmers leaving hostile comments underneath the video. It did not matter to the activist that the farmers vehemently opposed veganism and left vitriolic comments in the comments for his video: most importantly, they were interacting with his content. This, according to the content creator, was 'great for the algorithm' and helped to pierce the vegan bubble by taking the vegan message to a wider audience. In this instance, the sight of a vegan in a fight with slaughterhouse workers sticks viewers to conflict and the affective encounter between these two groups is central to the vegan activist's testimonial labours.

The vegan bubble can also be considered sticky in the way that certain topics bring vegans together into debates about the animal-rights movement. While this can generate unity between vegans in the bubble, it can also cause friction. In-fighting between vegans over contentious issues carries risk, in that testimonial messages may never pierce the bubble and thus fail to reach non-vegans who may potentially hear the vegan message and act upon it. During my interview with Lisa, we discussed the popularity of vegan debate videos on YouTube. She described the platform as a 'masculine arena' where one could easily be drawn into the drama of debates, either between vegans or between vegans and their detractors. Lisa said one vegan would make a video, to which another vegan would respond, and so on, until videos responding to other vegans circulated in a seemingly

never-ending cycle. This shows how the vegan bubble is a risk to the successful transmission of testimonial messages because videos of vegans arguing with each other about the future direction of the animal-rights movement may risk being less likely to be watched, and ideally acted upon, by potential new vegans. Lisa said she had talked about the vegan bubble with other activists and they wondered whether the proliferation of in-fighting – sometimes in the form of response videos, a popular YouTube genre that privileges content creators' emotional responses (Kim 2015; Oh 2017) – was to some extent performed for the algorithm, to gain a wider reach on social media. Lisa added that she was unsure how many non-vegans were watching this type of vegan 'content for content's sake' on social media. In any case, she found vegan in-fighting 'toxic' and 'unhelpful' for the animal advocacy movement. In this example, the testimonial address can be seen as unsuccessful since it may not reach non-vegans who could receive the message and potentially act upon it. Other vegans I spoke to were similarly concerned that their testimonial messages – in the form of their social media content – were not effective in reaching non-vegans on social media, or that their content would only appeal to the niche interests of some vegans.

One topic that generated debate in online vegan activism during fieldwork was intersectionality. It concerns whether animal advocacy should be solely concerned with animals or instead advocate for animal rights using an intersectional approach, to also engage with other social justice issues (Pendergrast 2018: 59). Intersectional vegans link the subjugation of animals to the subjugation of humans and speciesism is linked with other forms of oppression. Some interview participants were intersectional vegans who viewed both animal and human oppressions as interlinked (Nibert 2002) and saw value in advocating for human rights alongside animal rights. Other interview participants were non-intersectional and voiced their fears that the animal-rights message was at threat of becoming diluted by other oppressions apart from those of animals. One interview participant, a content creator, said that if he was arguing with other vegans online, it was mainly with intersectional vegans, as the two groups were 'completely at odds in our belief systems about the animal rights movement'. In not regarding veganism as a political movement, he claimed that veganism could be adopted by anyone regardless of where they sat on the political spectrum. Another anti-intersectional

participant said the issue had fractured the whole vegan movement, while other participants described the feelings that had been generated through the intersectionality debate in online animal-rights advocacy, using terms such as 'toxic' and 'shaming'. Such sentiments illustrate how emotions circulate in the vegan bubble, with difficult feelings sticking to vegans both as individuals and in their collective endeavours as activists. Considering vegans' testimonial labour as affective labour is important, since affect shapes how testimonial messages are created and how they are received. Moreover, to consider the vegan bubble as a sticky affective object emphasises the importance of relationality to vegan witnessing. In asking not what emotions are, but rather emphasising what emotions do, how they pass between bodies and how they stick, Ahmed (2004b: 4, 91) conceptualises stickiness as relationality, what she calls a 'with-ness' in which various elements of social life are bound together. This with-ness left its traces in the stories of the vegans I talked to in fieldwork and whose content I watched online. They were not only bound to the lives of non-human animals but also bound to the witnessing labours of other vegans, through engaging with and reacting to each other's activist content.

The notion of with-ness echoes the motif of connection that was developed in *Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness*, in which I showed how informants' stories of becoming vegan used connective metaphors that suggested the relationality between human beings and non-human animals. Having described these witnessing narratives, I moved to a discussion of awakening narratives. Activist Mark experiences what he terms a 'Eureka moment' watching vegan content on YouTube. While this moment is a form of connection, Mark also perceives a disconnect between what he had previously thought himself to be, an animal lover who rescued injured birds, and the realisation that he is also someone who consumes animals for food. In the light of this new knowledge, he comes to see those who listen to the arguments for veganism but do not take action upon these arguments as, in his words, animal abusers. Invoking abuse creates a disconnect and this disconnection carries an affective charge similar to that of Lisa earlier in this chapter, who describes her connection to other species in a myriad of ways, but also recognises her complicity in the dairy and egg industries. Her perception of something that 'just didn't sit right' is a disconnect. Additionally, as already described,

Jamie affectively experiences both connection and disconnection as he recognises the former sentient life in his meatball dinner. He links one animal to another – the pig in the meatball to the dog in the kitchen with him – and then connects their sentience to his own. It is not just the connection that is significant. He feels an embodied disconnection as well: 'Something just sort of clicked in my head and I was just like, oh, whoa.' The 'click' is an affective charge that results in a rapid transformation in which Jamie instantaneously becomes a vegan.

Disconnection can also be performative. In *4.4 Media witnessing*, I described a YouTube vigil outside a Welsh abattoir as a media event and argued that it shows how affect is central to the performativity of vegan belief. Additionally, it exemplifies how activists use connection and disconnection in their testimony to 'stick' the viewer's attention to the suffering of animals, while at the same time producing a surge of affect that splits apart the viewer from what they have previously believed about animal consumption. For example, in the abattoir video, protestors use affect to draw the viewer towards the body of the animal. One activist reaches her hand into a trailer to touch a pig's back before it is driven away to be killed: a gesture that symbolises a connection to another species. Activists in the video also performatively produce a disconnect through their choice of words. A placard reading 'dogs and cats killed here' draws attention to the disconnect of why humans eat some animals but not others, such as those that are deemed pets. The viewer also experiences the disconnect that is conveyed by another activist's words, who says that an abattoir worker kills 'defenceless, innocent, vulnerable infants'. While Ahmed's (2004b: 4, 91) concept of stickiness is relational, what she calls a 'with-ness', vegan testimony can also communicate the ways in which affect can be experienced as a disconnection. While affects can conduct connections, they can also conduct disjunctures (Stewart 2007: 3).

This chapter has emphasised the importance of affect to vegans' testimonial labours and has shown how affect is integral to the performative force of vegan witnessing. The circulation of affect is significant in the process of becoming vegan. Vegans are affected through their encounters with

animals, which leads vegans to affect others through their activism. Lisa's story illustrates how intense such encounters can be, exemplifying the notion of affect as a force of encounter that flows between human bodies and non-human bodies, breaking the boundaries between them. This form of affective witnessing is dynamic and profoundly relational. Relationality is also central to how affects sticks in vegan ideas, ethics and activism. This has been shown by presenting the vegan bubble as a site of vegan testimony, in which affect sticks to vegans and their testimonial labours, which in turn influences the efficacy of their ethical messages as witnesses. Vegans, then, are entangled with each other and with other animals through affective witnessing encounters. These encounters are in turn shared and experienced with others, to create co-witnesses and to bind witnessing communities (Richardson and Schankweiler 2020: 237).

Having shown how vegans can embody intensities of experience between human and non-human bodies, as well as demonstrate how affect adheres to individual and collective bodies in vegans' testimonial labours, the next chapter explores in more detail how affect is central to vegan witnessing. It presents three broad themes: the affective elements of vegans' online communities; how feelings circulate in the affective fabrics of digital culture (Kuntsman 2012: 1); and how these feelings shape vegan digital testimony.

8 Vegan Testimony and the Digital Sensory Encounter

8.1 Affective and sensory expression in vegan digital testimony

In the previous chapter, I proposed that vegan testimony is shaped significantly by affect. Vegan belief is formed by receiving affective testimony from others; following this, vegans seek to affect others by creating and circulating their own testimonies. I also showed how vegans are bound to each other and to other animals through intense, affective witnessing encounters. Affect here is understood as a shared relational process that is communicated to others in the hope of creating potential co-witnesses (Richardson and Schankweiler 2020: 238). In this chapter, I further explore how affect is central to vegan witnessing by showing why affective and sensory expression is crucial to vegan digital testimony. This testimony is made powerful by the way in which it employs the fabrics (Kuntsman 2012: 1) of digital culture to create potential co-witnesses, in what I call the digital sensory encounter. The story of an activist called Tony is employed to show how his own digital sensory encounter – watching online footage from an English slaughterhouse – carries powerful, affective images that are crucial to Tony's decision to become vegan. I also give an account of my fieldwork experience, in which I frame myself as a potential co-witness. I reflect on my own affective responses to vegan digital testimony, its implications for my data analysis and how it shaped my positionality as a researcher.

While I initially harboured doubts about whether I could experience a sufficient depth of immersion in the field through digital ethnography, the ways in which I was affected by my fieldwork – including the narratives of my informants – were instrumental to understanding how veganism as a philosophical belief is acquired and transmitted through media practices. Over the course of my research, I came to regard my fieldwork experiences as a series of digital sensory encounters in which philosophical belief is transmitted through affective, sensory experiences that seek to transform compassion into action. To illustrate this point, I will draw on the experience of watching a YouTube video of a vigil outside a slaughterhouse. This encounter called on me, as viewer, to become a co-witness in the suffering and deaths of cows that were being sent to slaughter. It was

an intensely sensory experience, in which the visual and sonic elements of the video were integral to the content creator's testimonial message. As I started to play the video, the first sound to set the scene was the fierce gust of wind against the microphone, which accentuated the bleakness of the setting, an industrial estate somewhere in northern England on a grey Sunday in winter. Because of the sound of the wind, I did not hear the livestock truck arriving, which slowed down to meet the security barriers of the slaughterhouse. There was a squeak, which I thought at first was the vehicle's brakes, but in fact it was a pig making a loud noise as the truck stopped. The activists gathered by the security barrier rapidly moved to the side of the truck and held their smartphone cameras close to the grilles to capture the faces of the pigs, so that the viewer of the video could watch their expressions as they grunted. I turned away from my laptop screen because I did not want to confront the plaintive expressions on the pigs' faces, who were hemmed together in the confined space of the truck, unaware of what awaited them on the other side of the security barrier. However, I could not block out the sounds they were making in unison, which filled the room where I was sitting, more than two hundred miles away from the slaughterhouse and several weeks after the original event had taken place. In the moment of watching, they were alive, their final hours commemorated by a video and a livestream in which they were mourned by the people who had been watching the event as it happened. The livestream was a present event that was archived into the future, producing a stretched temporality (Coleman 2018: 2). By the time I watched the video, the pigs had been long been killed and consumed. I was miles and weeks away, yet remained in close proximity to the pigs and to the activists' mourning of them. The video compelled me to share in the sensory experience of the pigs' deaths: to lock eyes with them, imagine what it would feel like to reach through the grilles and touch their faces, to listen to their sounds of fear. I was immersed in the affective energy that the video created, in an encounter that called on me to not just express empathy, but to act against suffering.

The affective energy of the video also served as a learning experience for me a researcher, guiding me to follow the action of the event in technologically mediated ways. Since I was watching on YouTube rather than being at the vigil physically, I sought other routes to experience the action taking

place in the video, so that I could gather more information to contextualise what I saw. Pausing the video, I looked up the location of the slaughterhouse on Google Maps. It was situated on a B road on the edge of an industrial estate, opposite a row of terraced houses and around the corner from a business called Happy Dogs Daycare. The slaughterhouse had 65 mentions on Google Reviews and a rating of 1.9 out of 5. One reviewer wrote that the company's haulier displayed a 'massively disrespectful' notice in the lorry cab that said 'Squeals on Wheels'. Other reviews alleged bad management, unsafe machines and staff that were forced to work even though they should have been in self-isolation as they were infected with Covid-19. One person described the slaughterhouse as 'hell on earth', with 'rampant animal cruelty'. Another reviewer said that they heard 'terrible screams' on the river path next to the slaughterhouse. They later sent this 'harrowing footage' to the RSPCA, alleging that the animal welfare charity did not take any action. Within this nondescript industrial estate, some animals were beloved companions with their own creche facilities, while other animals were killed in gas chambers.

Having enhanced my sensory experience of the vigil using maps and reviews, I returned to watching the video. Once the pigs had been driven into the slaughterhouse, the content creator used sound to deepen the impact of the testimony. Walking down a path that led alongside the slaughterhouse, he highlighted what he called the 'idyllic' sounds of the location he was walking through, inviting the viewer to listen to the flow of the river and the birds singing around him. He contrasted these sounds with the noise from the other side of the security fence, where the pigs could clearly be heard as they were transported to their deaths. He paused his commentary for a few moments and I closed my eyes, listening to the birds singing and the pigs squealing. Somewhere in the distance, church bells were pealing. In the livestream comments, someone said that watching these vigils was their Sunday church. Another said that the church bells were tolling for the victims. The testimonial was a digital sensory encounter that transformed the ordinary event of pigs being killed for food into an extraordinary, mediatised event that employed the practice of close listening to call on potential witnesses to hear what they did not want to see.

In *Chapter Four: The Witness*, I used my experience of watching a different slaughterhouse vigil on YouTube to suggest that the video sought to provoke, through its depiction of dead or soon-to-be-dead animals, an affective charge from the viewer. The activists' choices of words in the video were performative – for example, 'infant' instead of 'piglet' – and this suggested that activists were seeking an uptake of the vegan message through likening young animals to young humans. The following story is drawn from an interview with an activist named Tony and is employed to illustrate how a digital sensory encounter can produce a powerful affective charge that propels an individual to take action and become vegan. In watching harrowing footage of slaughter, Tony witnesses animal suffering as an embodied experience, recognising the pain and suffering of an animal as sensations that he could potentially endure as a human being.

During our interview, Tony recounted his story of becoming vegan by telling me about his working-class background in the north of England. Although he had seen the suffering of animals first-hand through working in the fishing industry as a younger man, it was not until his middle age that he watched second-hand activist footage of slaughterhouses on social media. When he left school, he worked in the fishing industry, as well as the leather industry. In both sectors, he met people who had spent years killing animals for human use. They told Tony that he would 'harden to it eventually'. To illustrate this part of his story, Tony said that he had a friend who worked in an egg factory. Day-old chicks were placed on a conveyor belt and some workers had the job of selecting male chicks and then macerating them, dropping them into a grinder as a waste product and killing them instantly. When Tony's friend started this job, he was appalled at the task of having to drop live male chicks into the grinder, but was told by colleagues that he would eventually 'harden to it'. Tony also told me about his family and their role in his decision to become vegan. He said that once his children had gone to university and started their careers, he would always cook their favourite dish when they came home to visit. His daughter, who had qualified as a teacher, said she would be coming home in the holidays, so Tony told her that he would go to the butchers and buy a couple of sides of ribs,

as this was her favourite dish. 'I used to come out of the butchers with sacks full of body parts and not think anything of it,' he said. On this occasion, his daughter asked her father not to go to the butchers, as she was now vegetarian. When she came home, Tony asked her why she had decided to become vegetarian and she said it was because she had been teaching a module about empathy and compassion at school. As part of his daughter's research, she had looked at some slaughterhouse footage online, which she then showed to Tony. He said he was 'appalled' by what he saw.

Tony then proceeded to tell me about the graphic footage that he had seen on social media and about what he called the 'trigger image' that led to him becoming vegan. He told me that 'I've seen the insides of lots of slaughterhouses now', yet he was not referring to his former work in the fish or leather industries, but in what he had seen through activist videos on social media. He spoke of the 'terrified animals who are typically six months old when they go to slaughter, the age of puppies, and you can see them backing away from the front of the channels that lead to the kill floor'. Tony said that he had seen six-month-old lambs trying to jump barriers so they would not be killed. He said he had also seen piglets cowering in a corner, with eyes shut, in the manner of a child shutting its eyes if it is hiding as part of a hide-and-seek game. Tony had also seen videos where gaff hooks were used to kill animals, instruments that he said he used to use himself when working on the docks as a younger man. These hooks were used for big fish but also to lift barrels of fish off trawlers, 'an iron bar with a handle at one end and hook at the other'. He said that he could not imagine swinging a gaff hook into the body of a living animal and then pulling the animal along to slit its throat and hang it up by its rear legs to bleed out. He added that what particularly horrified him was a video clip of a sow who was trying to swim out of a scald tank, which he explained was a stainless-steel tank full of boiling water to remove the coarse hairs on a pig's body. Tony said that around the same time of watching the footage in which the sow had tried to escape the scald tank, he had an experience in which he was cooking at home and was tipping a pan of potatoes over the sink to let out the boiling water, so that he could mash them. While holding the lid, Tony was scalded by the steam as the water escaped from the pan, so he had to put his arm under the cold tap for a few minutes. This

seemingly minor domestic incident took on a greater significance. Tony's accident provoked empathy for the sow in the scald tank, who had been shown in the video trying to swim out of the tank while slaughterhouse workers stood with large poles trying to push her back under. Tony, following his scalding incident, imagined the pain of being submerged in a tank of boiling water. He said he had originally encountered the footage of the sow through 'one of those wormholes' on social media, where the algorithm suggests more similar content based on what has been watched already. 'It turns out it was in a slaughterhouse in Yorkshire,' he said. Looking up the slaughterhouse online, he found out it was 'RSPCA-approved, Red Tractor, all that kind of thing'. After watching the distress of the sow in the video, Tony decided that he did not want to be complicit in her suffering. His empathy for the sow became a witnessing, in which his embodied experience was translated into the action of becoming a vegan.

Listening to the squealing of the pigs in the slaughterhouse vigil video, along with listening to Tony's account of the gaff hooks and the scald tanks, were two moments in fieldwork that stuck with me. I use the word 'stuck' here deliberately. In the previous chapter, I used Ahmed's (2004b: 4, 91) conception of 'sticky' affect – the relationality between individual and collective bodies – to suggest that in vegan testimony, affects circulate between the bodies of vegans and the bodies of non-human animals. My experience of watching – and listening to – the slaughterhouse vigil underlined this relationality between bodies. As a researcher, it attuned me to fleeting, sensory co-existence (Back and Puwar 2012: 11). The soundscape of the video also stuck me to other worlds. Simultaneously, I inhabited suburban England on a grey Sunday, with its everyday ambient sounds of birdsong and church bells, while the testimony of the activists forced me to confront the lives of the pigs being taken to slaughter and to pay close attention to their screams as they were killed. This affecting digital sensory encounter bound me to the worlds of activists and the worlds of the animals they were bearing witness to. It also bound me to the affective and sensory power of my digital fieldsite.

The affective force of vegan digital testimony is delivered through its sensory energy. This energy is produced by what Kuntsman (2012: 1-3) describes as affective fabrics – elements of digital culture such as comments, livestreams and viral content. Employing the concept of affective fabrics in the context of vegan digital testimony, the intention of this chapter is to show how these elements create digital sensory encounters. Schaefer (2018: 69) argues that the act of reading, whereby the pages of a book 'leap to life' and compel bodies to move, is an affective process that situates the body as a node for flows of power. Similarly, the affective fabrics of my digital fieldsite brought my laptop to life, compelling me to feel affected. Vegans' digital testimonies leap off the screen, creating an intensity of feeling that seeks to move the receiver of the testimony to take action against oppression. In the next section, I will describe how I experienced other digital sensory encounters in fieldwork and show how vegan digital testimony seeks to create a powerful embodied affective response, opening up the possibility of response from potential co-witnesses.

8.3 ASMR, emoji and affective labour

In *6.1 Ethics Shaped by Conflict*, I proposed that vegans' testimonies are often transmitted in the face of hostility. As reported, activist Elliott said that he had restricted the comments on his TikTok feed because of what he described as 'teenage trolls', who would leave mocking messages in the comments under his videos. This was typified by a comment that I saw on a vegan's social media post during fieldwork, which responded to what the vegan had claimed was animal abuse:

'Who cares if they are abused or not I love meat I love hearing their screams as they are dying 😂 😂 😂 😂 😂 😂 😂 😂'

What was striking about this comment, apart from its cruel sentiment, was the way in which systemic oppression was dismissed with the use of eight laughing emoji. The emoji – as affective fabrics of digital culture (Kuntsman 2012: 1-3) – were employed by someone hostile to veganism so that they

could underline their opposition to animal rights with a pictorial representation of mirth. Conversely, affective fabrics can also be employed by vegans in their digital content. Two examples are presented here, both being videos that employ affective fabrics to draw attention to speciesism. They each use fabrics in two different ways: one with emoji and the other with ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response), an intimacy-inducing sound performance (Lewkowich 2022: 123). Both fabrics present an intensity that is passed from the video's vegan creator to their audience, so as to draw attention towards inconsistent attitudes concerning different animal species.

The Absolute Worst of Cognitive Dissonance was uploaded to YouTube in October 2020 by atheist theology student Alex O'Connor, under the moniker CosmicSkeptic. While formerly his content creation focused on philosophy and religion, in 2019 he started making videos about the ethical case for veganism, subsequently becoming vegan himself. He later re-evaluated his ethical stance in 2023, when he questioned the utility of individual action regarding the consumption of animals (Cockshaw 2023). In The Absolute Worst of Cognitive Dissonance, O'Connor called attention to inconsistent, conflicting beliefs regarding the consumption of animals by analysing comments on social media posts about different species of animals. One way in which he did this was to analyse the comments under two different ASMR videos on YouTube to show his audience the ways in which speciesism can operate. ASMR creates a space of sonic intensity that is an affective experience using aural triggers, such as a whispered voice (Andersen 2015: 683-686). In embodying users' intimate relationship with networked devices, ASMR also privileges feeling rather than meaning (Gallagher 2019: 216) and the sounds produced by ASMR content produce affective responses that occur in the encounters between bodies (Smith and Snider 2019: 41-43). The first ASMR video that O'Connor presented was of a woman eating a dog's leg. A paw rested on the plate, surrounded by garnish and a dipping sauce. The use of ASMR made intensely intimate the slurping and crunching sounds of the woman as she ate the dog for her viewers. O'Connor contrasted the many negative reactions to this video with another video that showed another ASMR content creator eating a plate piled high with bacon. This produced an entirely different register of affects. The comments section for the bacon-eating video was replete with feelgood emoji: of bacon, thumbs raised upwards, hearts,

tongues slipping from mouths in anticipation of taste pleasure. The typographical style was similarly effusive: words were slammed into capital letters, exclamation marks were sprinkled liberally and certain words became elongated, deliberately mis-spelt to convey good feelings that brimmed over so much that they could not be contained by punctuation: '*MY GOSH THE CRUNCHIEST BACON ON EARTH. I LOVE BACON SOOO MUCH!*' The emoji in these videos are an example of how an ideographic system translates human sentiment into information capital (Abidin and Gn 2018). Additionally, emoji signify affective meaning and carry affective labour (Stark and Crawford 2015: 1-8). By highlighting internet users' affective labour in their reactions towards different species of animals, O'Connor delivered a sophisticated testimonial message that used the circulation of affective content to, in turn, affect his viewers. O'Connor's observations also speak to what Will Davies (2023) has termed the 'reaction economy', in which the digital public sphere is viewed as a site of 'reaction chains'. In a flow of affective energy, reactions to online content cause more reactions, which then lead to further reactions. As explained in the previous chapter, such flows of reaction can cause some vegans to consider their content trapped within a 'vegan bubble', which potentially compromises the successful transmission of their testimonial messages to non-vegans. Yet O'Connor's video, hosted on a philosophy channel, was arguably successful in delivering a vegan message to a largely non-vegan audience. The power of his video, moreover, lies in his close attention to the fabrics of digital media – ASMR and emoji – and their affective power. As Frosh (2019: 133) notes, social media witnessing is a deliberate and explicit practice of disclosure, which brings aspects of the world that have been experienced by the witness into the presence of others who have not yet experienced it. In the case of O'Connor's video, this produces a deliberate and explicit vegan testimony. In the next section, I will turn to considering other affective fabrics and how they create what Papacharissi (2016: 308-311) describes as affectively charged networked publics. Underlining my assertion that the intense affectivity of vegan witnessing underlines its performative power, I will show how affective fabrics bring vegan publics, and veganism as a philosophical belief, into being.

8.4 Affective publics and witnessable worlds

Before moving to the final part of this chapter, in which I explain how I experienced the contours of my fieldsite as a digital sensory encounter, I will consider two different fabrics of digital culture – images and hashtags – to illustrate how vegan digital testimony is transmitted, bringing affective vegan publics into being and underlining the deep relationality of vegan testimony. The first example is from a moment in fieldwork, looking at the Instagram feed of an activist I had recently started following. Their posts of animal suffering were particularly graphic, causing me to flinch whenever they appeared on my smartphone screen. Even though such images were small, cradled within the palm of my hand, they were powerful enough to provoke embodied responses, such as the way my hand involuntarily stretched out, as if trying to push the image away. One such image was of a half-dead pig sprawled on a slaughterhouse floor. Covered in its own blood, the pig looked to the camera as it flailed on hard concrete. Rather than distance myself from the image once again by turning my head away, I tried to sit with my discomfort for a second or two. Clicking to the next image in my feed, I saw a cow who, according to the Instagram poster, was about to be slaughtered. As Schankweiler et al (2018: 1-7) note, testimonial images affect and mobilise others in a complex relational network. The hashtags underneath the image of the cow provided an intriguing picture of how this relational network could develop. They read: 'YOUR #FOOD #DINNER #BEEF #STEAK #MEAT #MEATBALLS #MINCE #MINCEPIES #BEEFBURGER.' The image had been tagged in such a way as to potentially reach someone who would be searching Instagram for beef recipes. Consequently, the person seeking the beef recipe would be instantly connected to the face of the animal and to the circumstances of its death. Digital content carries affective possibilities since content can be shared and circulated at moments in the future (Smith and Snider 2019: 43). While I experienced the image as a fleeting, ephemeral moment, it also carried the possibility of being 'saved-as', what Kuntsman (2012: 7, following Garde-Hansen et al 2009), describes as a re-emergence of affect at some point in the future. The image of the cow is a powerful testimonial image. Framed with hashtags, it carries the potential to disrupt future discourses of normative animal consumption in the digital public sphere. This produces a digital sensory encounter in which the

viewer of the image not only sees the cow, but also connects taste pleasure with the death of the cow.

Returning briefly to the theme of the 'vegan bubble', the image of the cow and the hashtags carrying the affective possibility of taste are examples of how vegan witnesses sometimes seek to transmit testimonial messages that will break the bubble and deliver the message of animal suffering to those who eat animals for food. Activist Mark had told me about how he liked to subvert social media algorithms by inserting vegan messages in unlikely places through using 'meaty' clickbait and seeking to reach social media users with an ethical message that they were not expecting to see. He said that the use of hashtags was essential to this strategy, since users would search for the things that they wanted to see on their social media feeds, such as recipes containing animal products. The use of clickbait, enacted through hashtags, disrupted users' expectations of what they expected to find in their searches. Mark said that in some of his YouTube videos, such as those featuring vegan recipes, he would use certain keywords – 'pork sausages', 'meat pie recipe', 'steak recipe'. Such words, as he put it, 'draw people in' so that they would potentially see his vegan and animal-rights content. His strategy was echoed by another activist, Eve, who sought to attract non-vegans to her animal-rights content by using what she described as 'meaty' hashtags, such as #ukfarming and #bacon, which were likely to be used by non-vegans. This strategy is another example of the 'sticky' affect (Ahmed 2004b: 4, 91) discussed in the previous chapter: in this case, vegan testimonial messages stick to normative meat-eating practices through hashtags. I observed this hashtag stickiness in November 2021, when British supermarket Morrisons launched a Christmas campaign with the hashtag #lettertofarmer. Morrisons made an appeal on Twitter to children to send their 'dream Christmas dinner wishlist to Farmer Christmas'. The social media campaign was part of a wider strategy through which Morrisons expressed its support for British farmers. However, the campaign backfired quickly and #lettertofarmer was hijacked by vegans and animal-rights activists, who used the hashtag as a conduit to transmit a counter-narrative about animal agriculture. For example, one Twitter user requested a wish from Farmer Christmas, namely 'plates that aren't covered in cruelty', signed off with the #lettertofarmer hashtag. This hashtag is an

171

example of a framing device that transforms social media interactions into affectively charged networked publics, in which media become what Papacharissi (2016: 308-311) calls conduits for affective expression. In activist interventions such as #lettertofarmer, the aims of the grocer's social media campaign were subverted with an alternative truth about the provenance of Christmas dinner, in which activists attached their own vegan truths – words such as enslavement, mutilation, rape and murder – to the British farming industry, in turn producing a charge of affective expression. In the final section of this chapter, I will give a reflexive account of how affective expression in vegans' digital content framed my positionality as a researcher and the implications this presented for my data analysis.

8.5 The researcher as potential witness

I call my fieldwork a digital sensory encounter because vegans' testimonial messages were not only deeply affective but also because they called upon me to experience the pain and suffering of animals through richly textured worlds of uncompromising footage. In receiving vegan testimony, I was invited to experience the exploitation of animals as an embodied experience. This sensory way of knowing other, animal worlds – such as watching bleak footage of non-stun slaughter or the incessant barks of beagles who were destined to be subjects of experimentation – was heightened by the knowledge that these atrocities were not distant, but took place, every day, in England. They were ordinary, domestic events that were rendered extraordinary by the testimonial acts of vegans and animal-rights activists. As Frosh (2019: 122-133) contends, image testimonies are powerful because they draw attention to the vulnerabilities of digital existence and the ways in which digital media users are prone to encountering the horrors of events in distant places. This means, Frosh adds, that the possibilities of witnessing are intensified, since the 'perpetual presence' of digital media's liveness implicates all individuals as potential witnesses, who are called to respond to others. To end this chapter, I will give an account of my own experience of researcher and potential witness, where the digital sensory encounter of my fieldwork brought me into contact with events not in distant places but in worlds that are uncomfortably near. As I navigated my digital fieldsite as a 'witnessable world' (Frosh 2019: 122) adjacent to physical existence, my affective responses not

only shaped the direction of my data analysis, but also produced a feeling of failure that I did not respond adequately to the powerful testimonial messages that were presented to me by my informants. This, ultimately, underlined the power of vegan digital testimony.

The ways in which I responded to vegan digital testimony informed how I came to see veganism as a profoundly relational, affective practice. Initially, I had harboured some misgivings about conducting my research as a digital ethnography, but as I experienced the highly affective intensity of vegan testimony – in what I have called the digital sensory encounter – I developed a better understanding of how affective, sensory experience is integral to how vegan belief is acquired and transmitted. Although I had intended to conduct digital fieldwork before the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020, the pandemic made digital data collection a necessity. As my peers, along with researchers all over the world, changed their plans for data collection, my own plans to conduct a digital ethnography did not. I started the main period of my fieldwork in March 2021. After a year of pandemic restrictions, where much of my work and social life was conducted through screens rather than face-to-face interaction, I found myself growing somewhat weary of virtual communication, instead craving face-to-face human interaction and its sensory depth. This feeling of weariness may account for the desire to feel affected through what I could experience looking at a screen and may also explain my embodied responses to what I experienced in digital fieldwork, which at times delivered an intensity of feeling that I was not expecting to experience so deeply. The content that I watched on my laptop and smartphone fast became more than an act of watching and developed into an embodied practice of my research. My fingers moved in impulses, pressing hard on the keypad so that I could disappear into so-called rabbit holes of content. Other times, my shoulders would rise and my eyes would squeeze shut as I recoiled from images that I could not bear to look at. The sounds of animals in distress or being killed rang in my ears after I had turned off my laptop or turned my smartphone face-down. As fieldwork progressed, I recognised my compulsion to feel affected. Paasonen (2015: 30) contends that social media users are driven by a need for an 'affective jolt' and seek intensity in travelling through digital spaces. Certainly, I recognised this need as I conducted fieldwork online. My desire to experience such affective jolts was an important driver of my digital ethnographic

fieldwork. Being affected by what I saw in the field, and reflecting on these affectively charged experiences, was a mode of researcher participation – especially important since I am not a vegan and not engaged in vegan activism. More crucially, experiencing affective jolts informed my data analysis, whereby I came to recognise the vital importance of affect to vegan testimony.

My digital fieldsite immersed me in a never-ending flow of action that invited me to be affected. This invitation was made more intense by the sensorial depth of vegan digital content, which compelled me not only to see and hear animals' suffering but to also recognise their sentience through imagining and inhabiting their textures, smells and movements. Reflecting on my feelings and emotions informed reflexivity (Burkitt 2012: 458-459). Yet, at other times, I felt affected by a different physical sensation, a kind of inertia, which rooted me to the spot and restrained me from participating in the action that unfurled on my screen – for example, by writing comments under posts and videos. As a non-vegan, I was keenly aware of my lack of social capital, what Bourdieu (1986b: 248) understands as the actual or potential resources that confer membership of a group. However, while at times I perceived my non-activist researcher status as a barrier to full engagement in my field, at other times I played the role of professional stranger (Agar 1996), accepting that I could never become a full insider but rather a partial and reflexive insider cognisant of my positioning (Fine and Hallett 2014: 189). I attempt to represent my fieldwork experiences as stemming from what Lichterman (2017: 39) regards as the researcher's 'inevitable cluenessness' and seek to take the researcher's problems of communication as 'interesting facts in themselves'. Nonetheless, digital fieldwork was at times a somewhat lonely, isolating experience – a situation that was compounded by the slow emergence from social distancing measures following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the partiality of my researcher positioning, twinned with the method of conducting fieldwork through my laptop, produced knowledge that may not have been afforded through traditional, in-person fieldwork. As Horton (2021: 98-99) observes, this mode of 'home-bound' fieldwork resists the illusion of ethnographic immersion and produces a level of reflexivity that attends to the disjunctive knowledge of 'being here' while listening to the experiences of 'being there'. Even if I had 'been there' – in person at the slaughterhouse vigils, the outreach events, with interview participants in their

homes – this access would not necessarily have answered my central research questions, namely how vegan belief is brought into being and to what extent it is shaped by one's interactions with social media. As already noted in *2.4 Digital religion, mediatisation and ethnography*, if life is co-constructed with media and the social itself is shaped and formed through media (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 1), then 'being there' in co-presence with informants would not have produced knowledge of an event that was completely isolated from the social media through which it is later experienced and shared with others. Having problematised the question of how I participated in my field, I resolved it though discussing the activist social media content I watched in fieldwork with the vegans I spoke to during interviews. After a period of time in which I developed a feel for the content, discussions and debates in online vegan activism, I started to recruit potential participants for interviews by messaging content creators through YouTube and Instagram or, on Facebook, by seeking moderators' permission to advertise for participants in the study. Later, in interviews, I would share with informants my impressions of what I had seen and experienced in watching activists' social media content. These discussions, alongside my reflections on encountering online activist content for the first time, created a space in which I was able to reflect on the ways in which vegans' beliefs were brought into being through what they experienced and transmitted to others through their media practices.

An additional barrier to participation in the field stemmed from my increasing reluctance to spend time on social media in recent years. I had come to resent what I regarded at the performativity of maintaining a social media presence in my personal life, which shattered my confidence to enact a convincing and effective performance as a social researcher. As a supposed digital ethnographer, I felt inadequate and inauthentic. My lack of enthusiasm for maintaining a personal social media 'brand' gave me a shaky foundation for establishing credibility as a digital ethnographer. Thus, I carried what Seaver (2017: 7) describes as a sense of malaise about not fully 'being there' in the field and an anxiety about insufficient access to informants. In addition, I was concerned that my data would be too fragmented and inconsequential from which to draw observations about veganism as a philosophical belief. At the low points of my fieldwork, I felt frustrated and disappointed that my

ethnographic practice was experienced as a year-long series of hours in front of a laptop, skirting around the edges of vegan activism without getting to where I thought the 'real' data were. These were the moments in which I doubted the efficacy of my chosen method and whether it would generate sufficient data to write my thesis. Sometimes, this doubt soured to resentment. In November 2021, I interviewed an activist called Eve, who was living in an animal sanctuary where she volunteered her time. I had been finding it hard to set up an interview with her, so when she contacted me on WhatsApp late one afternoon and said she was free to talk, I paused the work I had been doing and set up a video call. Eve appeared on my screen, wrapped in a dressing gown and looking ready to relax after a day of manual labour. She said she had just been feeding pigs. This comment provoked an unexpected sense of longing in me and I wished I could be in the same physical location as Eve, helping her to feed the pigs at the sanctuary and getting to know her better without the time constraints of a brief conversation on WhatsApp. After months of conducting digital fieldwork, the sight of Eve brought to the fore a feeling of resentment that I felt constrained by the limitations of digital method. It was not until some months later, conducting post-field data analysis, that I came to recognise the strengths of digital method, which enabled me to articulate the affective and sensory force of vegan digital testimony, which I have given an account of in this chapter.

The affective force of vegan testimony also sits within the context of my own experiences as a non-vegan researcher. While I had undoubtedly been affected by the activist content I had seen in fieldwork and had been moved by the stories that were related to me in interviews, I did not become a vegan because of what I saw. While I had seen and recognised – for example, seeing the livestock trucks on the motorway, as explained in *Chapter Four: The Witness* – I had not witnessed or truly responded with action. Perhaps I recognised the oppression of animals in a somewhat more limited, intellectual way. As Oliver (2015: 482) notes, this mode of recognition not sufficient to be deemed witnessing and lacks the force that 'pulls us outside of ourselves and toward another' to act on the suffering of others with compassion. However, my experience on the motorway just before fieldwork started would prove to be significant in my later interviews, even though I only came to realise this retrospectively in the post-field period. In interviews, when asking participants to tell the stories of

how they became vegan, I would often ask participants if there were any moments that they thought were significant. In later reflecting on why I had asked this question, I may have been – without realising it at the time – seeking an account of the witnessing moment, even before I had encountered witnessing theory and its utility to make sense of participants' stories of becoming and being vegan. What I had seen on the motorway, and later in watching online activist content, could have been a potential witnessing moment for me, but ultimately was not.

In a piece of writing about PhD research called Dancing and Wrestling with Scholarship (2002), Les Back – who was one of my supervisors before he left Goldsmiths in 2022 – advises researchers that they should not be afraid to get close to the thing that they are trying to understand. Certainly, he encouraged this in my research project as I sought to understand veganism as a philosophical belief. However, this advice forced me to recognise that I was, in fact, afraid of getting close to ethical veganism – and, consequently, to my informants – since it would mean getting closer to myself and confronting the fact that I consumed animals for food. When I listened to my informants' stories, which were rich with transformation, I felt a strong pull towards a desire for my own research narrative of transformation and awakening, an uplifting carnivore-to-vegan story. Yet, while I was moved by my informants' narratives of transformation, I stopped short of transforming myself. My wish to be with Eve in co-presence was, in retrospect, also part of a wish to feel more affected by the transformation narratives of my interlocutors. I wondered if, through the sheer force of physical co-presence with them in interviews, I would feel more intensely moved – moved, perhaps, to take action myself. As well as struggling with feelings of inadequacy as a digital ethnographer, I also grappled with a sense of guilt that I was not undergoing my own transformation narrative and acting upon what I saw in fieldwork by becoming vegan myself. My research, undoubtedly, forced me into confronting my own attitudes and behaviours concerning the consumption of animals. While it resulted in a reduced consumption of animal products, it did not lead to me to become a vegan. I suspected that this response, in the eyes of my informants, was dreadfully inadequate. Listening to the ways in which my informants articulated their vegan identities, I became acutely aware of my own implication in animal oppression. My empathy was not enough. While I recognised oppression,

and was affected by it, I did not translate affect into action. In this realisation, holding a mirror to myself against my informants, I came to position vegans as witnesses. In bearing witness, vegans act on the suffering on others, in what Oliver (2015: 482) notes as the transformation of recognition into compassion. Suffering is not merely recognised, but action is taken upon it. As a researcher, I saw but did not witness.

My reflections on my fieldwork experiences are important to include here because recognising how I was affected by what I saw in the field helped me to theorise some ways in which veganism is expressed as a philosophical belief. While my position as outsider prompted doubts about the efficacy of my data collection, the ways in which I felt deeply affected in fieldwork enabled me to experience the power of vegan digital testimony. Through what I have called the digital sensory encounter of my fieldwork, ethical veganism was made vivid to me through the skills of vegan witnesses in delivering impactful testimonial messages. These messages worked in various modes of belief, in what Day (2016c: 61) has termed the 'trinity of belief' – belief that is rational, performative and emotional. While my response to informants' belief narratives, and to what I saw in the field, could be viewed as an unsuccessful reception for the vegan testimonial message, the skill of that message was in that it provided me with a mirror in which I was commanded to examine my own ethics. Vegan testimony, and the affective depth of vegan transformation narratives, changed me – even if not to the extent that my interlocutors may have wished. I remain, still, an outsider, a potential witness. However, without doubt, experiencing vegans' testimonial labours as a potential co-witness rendered me a different subject.

In this chapter, I have shown how framing my ethnography as a digital sensory encounter bound me not only to the worlds of vegans and non-human animals, but also to the affective power of my fieldsite, where affect transforms vegans' testimonial labours into social action. Testimonial messages are transmitted through the affective 'fabrics' of digital culture, the sensory energies that are materialised in elements such as sound, emoji, images and hashtags. Taken together, these

fabrics produce a lively economy of affect that transmits and sustains vegans' ethical messages. Employing the device of the digital sensory encounter, I have shown how the circulation of affect, carried by these fabrics, shaped how I participated in the field, which in turn prompted reflexivity about my outsider status and the efficacy of my data collection.

In reflecting on how affect guided my research journey, I have also identified the skill of vegans in telling and retelling transformational stories. Building on previous discussions of transformation narratives, the next chapter will move from affect into discussions of becoming and potentiality. It will trace how vegans develop their narratives in a philosophy of becoming in which the universe is not dependent on a higher power (Connolly 2011: 43; Beaman 2020: 248) and suggest that vegans present – in their performative, affective testimony – the potential to become a new subject through one's ethical actions. Stewart's (2007: 2-3) conception of 'ordinary affects' provide a useful segue here, as it can be employed to consider the affective practices of vegans as carrying potential, what Stewart calls 'a something coming together'. Furthermore, I will show how vegans' use of affect – affect as the immanence of futurity and potential (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 9) – is crucial to how they conceptualise a vegan future. Through their role as ethical witnesses, vegans create the conditions for potentiality and becoming.

9 Vegans as Witnesses to the Future

9.1 Hope, uncertainty and the affective promise of the future

So far, this thesis has shown how affect is central to the performative power of the vegan witness and how affective and sensory expression is crucial to vegan digital testimony. In the previous chapter, Smith and Snider's (2019: 43) claim that digital content carries affective possibilities because it can be shared and circulated at moments in the future was employed to illustrate how my experience of watching social media content about veganism was fleeting and ephemeral, while also carrying the possibility of being experienced at an indeterminate point in the future. In the final empirical chapter, I propose that vegans, through their actions as witnesses, experience transformation and then performatively and affectively communicate their transformation to a future self – and a future world – to others. Firstly, their affective relationship to the future can carry a hopefulness that a vegan future will one day become a reality and that animals will be liberated from human oppression. However, this hope must also co-exist with despair and despondency. Obliged to witness the violence of animal use, vegans may also imagine the future, which may entail a feeling of uncertainty. Secondly, the imagined vegan future is not anthropocentric. Vegans' affective belonging attaches them to the suffering of animals and the existential threat of environmental collapse. In confronting anthropocentrism, vegans present an alternative future in which humans are radically de-centred. This challenge to anthropocentrism sees vegans engage with the potential of what humans and animals might become together (Calarco 2014: 428). Vegans' stories, which draw attention to species hierarchy, also sit in the context of posthuman subjectivity, what Braidotti (2019: 76) has termed post-anthropocentric relations. Thirdly, vegans performatively communicate their affective promise about the future in articulating how veganism can transform the self as well as transform the world. For example, vegans circulate social media images that communicate the potential of transformation, demonstrating the ways in which their philosophical belief can be shaped by media practices.

In 2019, BBC iPlayer's Facebook account posted a clip from a TV programme called *Blue Planet Live*, featuring a Mediterranean monk seal nicknamed Kostis, described as one of the most endangered marine mammals on the planet. He had been rescued by Greek conservationists after having become separated from his mother in a storm. After a five-month rehabilitation period, Kostis was finally released back into the sea. As a young breeding male, it was hoped that he would eventually play a role in helping his species to recover. Two years later, in July 2021, three-year-old Kostis was found floating dead in the water off the coast of Alonissos, having been killed with a spear gun (Smith 2021b). The apparently intentional killing of Kostis, who had become something of a local celebrity, provoked outrage among locals and sparked an investigation into his untimely death (Prothero 2021). The news of Kostis's death broke the day before I spoke to activist Lisa, whose becoming-vegan story was presented in *Chapter Six: Veganism as a Practice of Affective Witnessing*. In discussing the death of Kostis the seal, Lisa said that she was forced to confront such incidents of violence towards animals on a daily basis. These incidents were harrowing, she added, but nevertheless she felt obliged to engage with them, so that she could fully understand who and what she was fighting for through her activism. She described this endeavour as the sense of 'constantly having to straddle despair and hope at the same time […] like living in a continual paradox'. While it was necessary for her to expose herself to trauma, Lisa said she needed to remain hopeful enough so that she could continue to advocate on behalf of animals. She described the precarity of inhabiting this paradox, of exposing herself to animal suffering enough so that she was informed about what was going on, while at the same time not exposing herself to suffering to the point where she was engulfed by grief and hopelessness. If she successfully achieved the fine balance between hope and despair, she felt equipped to continue her activism and, in her words, 'create that hope' necessary for her advocacy. In turn, she said, this hope could be harnessed to help create a better future for animals.

In *Chapter Six: Veganism as a Practice of Affective Witnessing*, I showed how Lisa's story of becoming vegan suggested that she exemplified the figure of the affective witness. Lisa demonstrated a deep relationality between human and non-human bodies, events and worlds. This

relationality shaped her future: through witnessing violence towards animals as a child, Lisa later used her grief to later imagine a vegan future and advocate for it in her activism as an adult. Additionally, Lisa described her everyday encounters with the micro-worlds of other animals, such as the care and attention she harnessed to imagine the individual lifeworlds of the insects that inhabited her house. In practising curiosity and fascination, such encounters opened Lisa's mind to the beauty and wonder of the world around her. Through Lisa's intricate imaginings of other animal bodies and other worlds – what she called 'bigger-than-human' worlds – she oriented herself towards the potential of how a vegan future could enrich the lives of both humans and other animals. Lisa had talked about her bonds with animals in terms that suggested a certain wonder, such as describing how she was captivated by watching lambs gambolling in fields on family trips to the countryside. Eventually, this wonder came to co-exist with despair, when she learned the fate of the lambs as their dead bodies were presented to her on a plate during a family meal.

Research participants' stories of their bonds with animals, as described in previous chapters and further elaborated in this chapter, indicate the potential of how humans' lives intersect with non-human agents, in particular animals. As already explained in *Chapter Two: The Research Context*, one methodological starting point for the research project that would eventually become *Witnesses to the Future* was Lori Beaman's (2020: 245-251) reflections on the ways in which humans and animals co-exist in the current time of environmental crisis. She frames this co-existence as a 'world of wonder'. Beaman uses the placeholder term of an emerging worldview to present the opportunity of disrupting the binaries of religious and non-religious category. This worldview is not religious or spiritual; yet the religious, the spiritual and the transcendent are not excluded. Reflecting on her fieldwork with sea turtle conservation volunteers, Beaman (2020: 248) draws on Connolly's (2011: 43) interpretation of immanence as a philosophy of becoming in which the universe is not dependent on a higher power. Beaman (2021: 2-4) later develops her argument to ask what would happen if religion and spirituality were disassociated from Weber's (1991: 139) thesis of disenchantment, in which he claimed that rationalisation and the ability to 'master all things by calculation' would lead to a disenchantment of the world in which 'one need no longer have recourse to magical means in

order to implore or master the spirits'. Beaman questions Weber's claim about the disappearance of mystery to propose that enchantment should not be just about 'ghosts, gods and goodness', or related to transcendent beings, magic and religion, but can also encompass wonder and delight. As an example, Beaman describes her own moments of enchantment as spine-tingling experiences of multiple frequencies, or registers, in which she marvels at the beauty of music or certain aspects of the natural world. She stresses that her awe of, and gratitude for, these moments is not solely attributable to religion, magic and the divine. Rather, it indicates that enchantment is located between and beyond religious and non-religious categorisation. While Beaman does not reference affect theory, her descriptions of frequencies, registers and spine-tingling are nonetheless suggestive of affective responses. This is also echoed in her conception of enchantment as 'something that acts upon us', a force that displaces human control and creates a space for human and non-human relations to be reconceptualised. Beaman's (2020, 2021) work on wonder and enchantment in the empirical context of sea turtle volunteering is an important touchstone for my own research with vegans. It also serves as a useful reference point through which to develop research into the porosity of religious and non-religious categorisation. My work on the affective aspects of vegan practice, which has been covered in previous chapters, enriches Beaman's work further by elaborating how vegan witnessing communities are bound by affect's social energy (as discussed in *Chapter Seven: Veganism as a Practice of Affective Witnessing*). Attention to vegans' affective practices is important because it creates a space to think about in-betweenness and to consider the intensities that pass from body to body, whether those bodies are human or non-human. Affect marks a body's belonging, or non-belonging, to these encounters (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 1-2). However, while I concur with Beaman about the possibilities for reclaiming enchantment away from magic and religion, I suggest that her proposed alternative model of enchantment does not fully account for how the vegans in *Witnesses to the Future* expressed feelings of grief, despair and pessimism. While their narratives about their ethical practices did indeed suggest moments of wonder and delight concerning animals, their enchantment was tempered with inhabiting a deep state of uncertainty. Lisa's comments illustrate this amply: she was torn between feelings of hope and despair, she said, like being on a tightrope walk. She would expose herself to animal suffering cautiously and

incrementally, taking great care not to see too much suffering. If this happened, she ran the risk of being plunged into despair. If she managed to keep her balance, she could keep creating the hope that was necessary to continue her activism. However, hope could not be attained without witnessing atrocity.

For myself as researcher, I walked a similar tightrope in order to gain a better understanding of veganism as an ethical practice. There was not an option in fieldwork to appreciate in uncomplicated terms the wonder and delight of animals: my interactions with vegans also placed an obligation on me to empathise with their despair and to try to inhabit their state of uncertainty through engaging with atrocity. One participant, Fiona, described this state when she commented that being a vegan 'does set you up for a bit of torment […] you constantly wrestle with what's going on in the world'. She said that the more she knew about the world – about animal use, or about wider environmental destruction – the more she experienced this torment. She said she felt powerless, since on an individual level she felt incapable of changing the world for the better. She added that she disliked graphic social media posts of animal suffering. When I looked at similar online content, I understood what Fiona meant by wrestling with torment and feeling exposed to the realities of how animals are used for human benefit. How much I was willing, or able, to expose myself to this reality during fieldwork depended on how resilient I was feeling on any particular day. Early in fieldwork, I watched *Earthlings* in one sitting, rendered numb by its presentation of how animals are used for food, clothing, entertainment and scientific research. Later into fieldwork, other documentaries such as *Dominion* remained unchecked items on my to-watch list while I waited for a day when I would be in a more resilient state to be able to set myself up for the torment that Fiona described. One informant had advised me that if I felt unable to watch the whole of *Dominion,* I should at least try to watch the first ten minutes. The opening sequences of the documentary conveyed atrocity not in graphic detail but conveyed it through scale. A series of drone shots of animal-processing facilities, such as fish farms and poultry sheds, presented the unnatural habitats of animals – described as 'faceless units of production' – who were raised for human consumption. This was followed by a rapidly edited sequence of the tools used to kill animals – hooks, chains, saws, knives and bullets. There was also

a clip of a beagle locked inside a cage in a pitch-black facility, frightened as a torch shone into its eyes. At this stage in fieldwork, I had been talking about the use of beagles in vivisection in interviews with some participants, who were involved in the campaign against MBR Acres, a puppy breeding facility in Cambridgeshire. The work of the activists at MBR Acres had reached mainstream media, such as the coverage by British tabloid the *Daily Mirror*. On the newspaper's website, it showed undercover footage of workers piling dogs into overcrowded trolleys by the scruff of their necks, or whimpering in crates before they were transported to laboratories across the UK, where they would later be force-fed substances as part of drug testing (Farhoud 2021). There was no wonder or delight in watching these depictions of animal use, or precious little enchantment about the beauty of the natural world. In watching such footage, I inhabited – if only briefly – the unsettled world of my interlocutors, who engaged with atrocity in order to present an alternative, more compassionate, vision of how the world could and should be. Through being witnesses and entering into an ethico-political relation to events (Richardson and Zolkos 2022: 5), vegans cannot experience undiluted enchantment about the lifeworlds of animals but must experience grief and hopelessness in order to create hope and advocate for change. Put another way, they inhabit uncertainty.

Activist Zach reflected on the ways in which his outlook on the world had changed since becoming vegan, conceding that it was 'probably for the worst'. One of Zach's friends had described becoming vegan as like finding a locked chest; when a key was put in the chest, it would open the dark side of humanity. Zach offered an example, of walking down the street with a non-vegan friend and seeing a McDonald's advertisement. The friend, Zach said, would probably associate the advertisement with a tasty meal, while Zach would see in the advertisement a dead animal that was once alive. Since becoming a vegan, he had come to see animal rights as an extension of human rights, for the reason that humans and non-human animals 'have the capacity to experience'. His human experience was thus enmeshed with non-human experience. Another activist, Thea, had described this as entanglement, particularly in the way that she had come to regard human oppressions as being knotted with animal oppressions. In becoming vegan, she became more aware of different oppressions – such as human rights violations – and the complexity of these oppressions became a

more powerful force for her. She described it as a Hydra, in reference to the water-serpent with several heads of Greek myth. The Hydra of multiple oppressions had made her more aware of what she called the many negative forces in the world, as well as sharpening her consciousness to how eating animals reinforces other kinds of oppressions, such as the everyday sexism she sometimes encountered. Zach and Thea's observations about the complexities of vegan witnessing reinforce my contention that vegans do not unproblematically experience a 'world of wonder' akin to Beaman's sea turtle volunteers. Rather, they are under an obligation to carry the burden of experiencing hopelessness and despair, which in turn places an obligation on them to act against oppression. In their role as ethical witnesses, vegans communicate to others the potential for the world to be otherwise (see Biehl and Locke 2017: 3-4). However, to perform their vision of the future, they must also engage with acknowledging the multiple oppressions against non-human animals. Thus, vegans call upon others to join them in recognising the horrors of human violence against non-human animals so that action can be taken to create a vegan future.

As already argued, while vegans express a temporal orientation towards the future, this future means inhabiting uncertainty. Activist Matthew said that while his initial activism had been optimistic, he was now more pessimistic. 'The numbers are against us,' he commented, because of global population growth and the fact that more human beings are being born than people becoming vegan. Nevertheless, even though he suspected that vegans were losing their fight, he said that it was still a fight worth fighting. He asked me if I had considered veganism myself and I told him that I had arrived at the topic of my research not from the standpoint of an activist scholar but as a sociologist of religion who wished to investigate veganism as a philosophical belief. I added that I had watched *Earthlings* and my immediate response had been one of shame, since the film forced me to confront, for the first time, the ways in which human exert dominance over animals. The film – and what I had experienced in fieldwork more generally – was transformative, in that it obliged me to see the relationship between humans and animals in a completely different way than I had previously. The transformative power of living as a vegan, for Matthew, was about what he called embracing ideas of respect. He said that to become vegan, he felt that one should have an open mind and a kind

heart. He suggested that I had these two attributes, which was a significant comment because it communicated potential to me: the person I could become if I could live as a vegan. It also laid bare my own inadequacies in addressing my own respect for other animals and made me aware of the ways in which I stopped short of transforming myself by failing to become a vegan, as discussed in *8.5 The Researcher as Potential Witness*. Matthew communicated to me a suggestion for the person that I could potentially become through living as a vegan, a model of who my future self could be. He also gave a cogent argument for the imperative to unlearn human superiority. I will return to Matthew later in the chapter to discuss another aspect of how vegans may orient themselves towards the future through challenging anthropocentrism, which in turn harbours the potentiality of posthuman subjectivity. Before doing so, I will return to the story of Kostis the seal to consider another aspect of vegans' affective relationship to the future and how this relationship may entail a foreclosure of the future.

In the video clip from the BBC's 2019 *Blue Planet Live* Facebook post, a Greek conservationist explained how tourists have, over time, come to encroach on the living spaces of Mediterranean monk seals such as Kostis. This human intensity, he said, has pushed out the seals from their original habitat into secluded marine caves, so that they can find a space in which to rest and breed. The clip showed the rescue facility where Kostis eventually reached the 50-kilo weight that was required for his release back into the wild. After five months of rehabilitation, he was taken to a cove and the last shots of the clip showed Kostis flopping on his belly to swim back into the sea. The comments in the Facebook post, for the most part, conveyed hopefulness, both for the future life of Kostis and for the survival of his species. However, one comment did not convey hope, but instead sounded a warning that the hoped-for future was in doubt. It read: 'Humans are the plague that will destroy life on this planet.' This comment, in contrast to the others, foreclosed the future, particularly the desired future for Kostis – to breed and for his species to be averted from extinction. While the BBC's post had carried an affective potential of the future in which humans and other animals would successfully co-exist with each other, the warning comment also prevented this potential from becoming a possibility. While the comments under the post were not necessarily written by vegans, the

comments nonetheless help to underline the claim made thus far in this chapter: that vegans' affective relationship to the future entails hope co-existing with despair. Through being obliged to engage with what they view as the horrors and atrocities of how animals' lives are imperilled by human beings, vegans' affective relationship to the future, while hopeful, is also experienced as a potential foreclosure of the future. This means that transformation is not an uncomplicated matter of enchantment, but a necessary engagement with uncertainty. Affective belonging, for vegans, attaches them to myriad touchpoints of contact with oppression – of animals, of human beings – alongside feeling acutely the existential threat of environmental collapse.

My argument concerning vegans' affective belonging can be placed in the context of wider sociological literature concerning the future. For example, Adams et al (2009: 246) contend that a defining feature of contemporary life is how it is characterised by a state of anticipation in which life is lived towards the future, which involves inhabiting uncertainty in anticipation of attaining a better future. Additionally, Tutton (2023: 439-443) conceptualises a sociology of futurelessness, assessing claims that since the start of the current century, collective feelings about the future have resulted in a feeling of the future being increasingly foreclosed, rather than open and expanding (MacDonald 2018: 57) or that the future will be an 'unavoidable catastrophe' (Berardi 2011: 126). Tutton understands futurelessness – in the context of climate change, mass extinction and societal conflict – as an affective relationship to the future in which social actors' hopes and wishes for enacting their desired futures are prevented from becoming a possibility. These arguments are relevant to the data presented thus far in this chapter, in which vegans imagine the future experiences of how humans and other animals co-exist. Having established the figure of the vegan witness in this thesis, it is important to underline that their testimony is not only concerned with testifying to the past oppression of animals, but is also oriented towards the possibilities of the future. Thus, witnessing can be conceived of as an ongoing process that recognises that the care of both human and non-human life is at stake and expands the category of the human to produce an entanglement between the human and the more-than-human (Sheikh 2018: 147-148). Richardson and Zolkos (2022: 3-4) discuss the complication of taking the 'human' as a subject and an object of testimony, working with

Vint's (2020) analysis of the phrase 'after the human', which critiques who and what has been excluded from the definition of 'human' by Western thought and that from this standpoint, the human in testimonial theory is no longer the sole author of witnessing. In this sense, add Richardson and Zolkos, the notion of witnessing after the human must recognise that testimony becomes more-than-human, which means consideration of a non-anthropocentric orientation to testimonial production. The next section discusses the ways in which vegans, rejecting anthropocentrism, are enmeshed with the social worlds of other animals.

9.2 A rejection of anthropocentrism

Thus far, I have argued that the vegans in this study inhabit a state of uncertainty, in which grief and despair are entangled with hope and optimism. It is from this contingency that vegans align themselves with a future in which humans are radically de-centred. To end this chapter, I trace the ways in which vegans confront anthropocentrism. This rejection of anthropocentrism is, in part, an affective endeavour. As vegans embody, and communicate to others, the affective relationality between their human bodies and other animal bodies, they call on others to unlearn human superiority, which displaces the human as having dominance over other animals. Becoming a vegan witness means to attend to the affective, relational landscape of human and non-human entanglement, fashioning what Biehl and Locke (2017: 3-5) have described as an 'alternative field of immanence' that carries 'the potential for things to be otherwise'. In their rejection of anthropocentrism, vegans' world-repairing actions (Woodhead 2016c; Beaman 2017) draw attention to the ways in which the world could be otherwise and how the world could be repaired.

Vegans' orientation towards the future necessarily involves rejecting anthropocentrism, the notion that humanity is the measure of all things (Noske 1997: 183). Anthropocentrism, which has privileged human freedom at the expense of the subjugation of animal others (Weitzenfeld and Joy 2014: 3), comprises what Calarco (2014: 416-419) argues is a binary human-animal ontology that creates and maintains a privileged space for human beings, to the extent that the exploitation and

commodification of animals is deeply ingrained in human society and culture. As *Witnesses to the Future* is concerned with the investigation of veganism as a philosophical belief, I use as a point of departure Abby Day's (2011: 44) identification of two belief orientations – anthropocentric and theocentric – to interpret her informants' belief narratives multidimensionally. Day (2011: 156-157) uses the term anthropocentric to explain how some of her informants were oriented towards human beings rather than gods. They located power and authority with human beings, such as friends and family, and articulated their beliefs with reference to their human relationships, which were more central to their lives than God. In identifying these two belief orientations, Day reclaims belief as a potentially non-religious term, in that it treats belief as multidimensional and not bound to religious category (2011: 202). Setting aside the question of whether my informants considered themselves to hold a belief about veganism, which was discussed in *Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness* and *Chapter Six: Veganism as a Performative Act of Bearing Witness*, my findings strongly suggest that vegans do not locate power and authority with human beings. Rather, animals play a central role in their lives, which represents a challenge to, and ultimately a rejection of, anthropocentrism. As argued in past chapters, veganism as a practice of ethical subjectivity is relational and affective. Becoming and being vegan means to recognise, then act upon, anthropocentrism. Following this, the recognition of anthropocentrism is then performatively and affectively communicated to others. Vegans demonstrate the potential of being posthuman subjects, through what Braidotti and Hlavajova (2018: 1-2) describe as a mode of affective belonging.

Vegans' orientation towards the future is shaped by the ways in which they develop their relations with animals, in the context of what activist Matthew described as an unlearning of human superiority. Many years before he became vegan in adulthood, Matthew had felt an empathy for what he termed 'our fellow animals'. When he eventually became vegan, he said that he underwent a process of unlearning human superiority and speciesism. He recalled that as a child, his first step towards building empathy with animals – who, throughout our interview, he was careful to refer to as 'individuals' – was prompted by holding in his hand a small insect that looked like a leaf. His fascination with this insect was one of the first of many encounters in which Matthew developed an

appreciation of other animals, individuals who taught him how to unlearn his previously assumed human superiority. At the time of our conversation, Matthew was volunteering at an animal sanctuary and related an example of a moment in which, since becoming a vegan, he saw the world differently than he had before. There was a particular cow at the sanctuary with whom Matthew had started to spend more time with on his visits. He recounted how he had been sitting next to the cow while reading a book, but he did not manage to do much reading because she lay down beside him and started to brush herself against him. The cow, Matthew said, was very careful not to hurt him. She brushed against him, trying to gauge his reaction. Eventually, she felt relaxed enough to rest her entire head into his lap. This moment reinforced his respect for animals as individuals. Through his story of the cow resting her head upon his lap, Matthew challenged anthropocentrism by calling attention to the individuality of an animal that is used for food and instead emphasising his rich relational and affective bond with the rescued animal. In another story, he talked about 'fishes' and the way in which they are 'invisibilised' through language when they are referred to as fish rather than fishes. He said that he had a powerful conversation with someone who had been fishing – 'so-called fishing', Matthew called it. The person had taken half an hour to reel in a fish and told Matthew how hard the fish had fought against being dragged out of the water. Following this experience, the person said that they could never eat a fish again. Matthew said that even if fishes did not scream audibly, they were still 'individuals who have their own irreplaceable lives and stories'. This prompted me to remember an incident from my childhood. Our neighbour, a fisherman, would sometimes leave live crabs in a bucket of water outside our front door, a gift from the day's catch to be killed and eaten. I was confronted with their sentience – living crabs in the plural rather than crab as a singular food. By referring to fishes, not fish, and by inviting me to imagine how I would feel if I reeled in one of these individual fishes myself, Matthew affectively and relationally drew attention to anthropocentrism and how it could be challenged.

In talking with vegans during interviews, a common theme was how participants articulated human superiority over other species. For example, Joshua and Julie both talked about how, in becoming vegan, they had come to de-centre themselves in relation to other animals. Joshua, a YouTuber, said

that since becoming vegan, he related to animals in new ways. Before becoming vegan, if he saw a fly on the wall in his home, he would try to swat it or kill it. Nowadays, he did not seek to inflict harm upon such insects, as he had developed an ethical awareness that had removed his hitherto assumed right to take away a sentient life for his own convenience. Joshua added that while he did not think himself to be religious, he nonetheless believed that life is a lesson in which humans should consider what they are on Earth to learn and to develop an understanding of how they should live during their lifetime. He said that he had made the decision to spend his time on Earth striving to make it a better place for everyone, including non-human animals. Joshua's words suggested a rejection of anthropocentrism and a rejection of human superiority over other species. Julie, a vegetarian since the early 1980s and a vegan for the past two decades, communicated the de-centring of humans in similar terms. She said that as a human, she did not regard herself as being any more important than other animals. In fact, she called human beings 'a parasitic species', a 'cancer' that had taken too much from the Earth without putting it back, instead 'just tearing everything apart'. She did not think humans to be more important than other animals; rather, she said, she considered humans to be less valuable than other animals. For this reason, she could not bring herself to end the life of another sentient being. Other non-human sentient beings were, in her words, as lucky to possess life as she was. In acknowledging their sentience, she did not want to end their lives for her own taste pleasure or her convenience. In highlighting and rejecting human dominance over other species, Julie can be seen as conveying the potential of becoming and being a post-anthropocentric, future posthuman subject. In this post-anthropocentric future, humans are not centred but instead operate in a reciprocal relationship with non-human objects and processes (Caracciolo et al 2022: 6). The stories of vegan subjectivity that have been presented in this thesis also provide an opportunity to consider what humans are in the process of becoming, in what Braidotti (2013: 12) thinks of as the posthuman future predicament. For example, Julie's comment about humans taking too much from the Earth without putting it back hints at the current moment of the Anthropocene, which has shown the extent to which humans have wreaked havoc on the world's ecosystems. This provokes an uncertainty, an anxiety about the future that means vegan transformation is not necessarily felt with sentiments of wonder or enchantment. Instead, existential

uncertainty is felt affectively. In the posthuman condition, post-anthropocentrism challenges species hierarchy and necessitates a restructuring of the relationship between humans and animals (Braidotti 2013: 1-2, 81).

The multi-layered complex relationality between human and non-human sentient life was repeatedly articulated by the interview participants in *Witnesses to the Future*. Additionally, for the participants who were also social media activists, their ethical witnessing entailed an understanding of the interactions between themselves as humans and non-human agents such as algorithms. For example, Matthew, in describing his social media activism, said that he tried to understand how platforms' algorithms worked so that his animal-rights videos would reach as many people as possible. He said that on YouTube particularly, every element of his content mattered, such as how it was tagged, the video description and the title. Because of this, he said he undertook research into the best keywords to use so that he could employ language that stood a better chance of being captured in YouTube searches. He spoke of websites where one could type in phrases such as 'vegan debate' and then similar keywords would be generated that he could make sure to include in his videos, to increase the chances of his vegan message being seen by as many people as possible. These keywords were also, he said, an effective tool to determine what kind of content to create so that it would appear in people's searches. Thus, language was a crucial element of his advocacy. Matthew's use of language was, in part, shaped by what other people were searching for on social media. By attending to non-human elements – how he perceived social media algorithms to work – Matthew could amplify the voices of non-human animals and thus challenge human superiority in his online advocacy. This exemplifies how, in having the capacity to affect and be affected, posthuman intersubjectivity is part of a complex human and non-human relational universe in which humans interact with non-human agents, such as those that relate to the Earth – such as plants, animals and bacteria – as well as technological agents such as wires, codes and algorithms (Braidotti 2019: 45-46).

While I have argued that the vegans in this study are not anthropocentric, to say that they are -centric towards something else is not a simple matter. In outlining three versions of ethical non-anthropocentrism, Thompson (2017: 77-81) outlines sentiocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism. Sentiocentrism extends modern theories of human ethics, utilitarian or deontological, to include non-human animals. Biocentrism finds moral value in all living things, while ecocentrism takes a more holistic approach in which a collection of living and non-living things makes up an ecosystem. This ecosystem has intrinsic value and moral significance. Another concept that contests anthropocentrism is zoocentrism, which recognises that non-human animals can be moral subjects (Franklin and White 2001). Although it was clear that the lives of non-human animals were enmeshed with the human lives of the vegans in this study, applying the notion of centrality seemed somewhat at odds with the relational, affective and entangled modes of belonging and becoming with other animals that have been argued throughout this thesis. In making the point that affective expression is integral to vegan belief, I have drawn on theory that describes how affect drives a body's perpetual becoming and is pulled beyond itself to meet other bodies, so that it is webbed in its relations with other bodies (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 3). Bodies are not stable entities, but rather can be thought of as processes that extend themselves to be immersed and entangled in other worlds, disrupting the boundaries between human and non-human (Blackman 2012: 1). As this relates to the data that has been presented in this thesis, I have shown how vegans' social worlds are entangled with the social worlds of other animals. Entanglement conveys the sense of bodies coming together, a process of becoming that knots together various modes of knowledge production (Nolas and Varvantakis 2018). Lisle (2021: 435-439) mobilises two central claims concerning entanglement: that it always involves both human and non-human entities, and that it is always emergent and in process. Her Speculative Lexicon of Entanglement argues against solidifying and enclosing entanglement as an ethos and methodological tool, regarding entanglement as not a fixed object of knowledge, but is knowledge that cannot be quantified or assigned clear parameters. Rather, thinking with entanglement is to investigate how subjects, objects, ideas and relations are knotted with each other. Lisle argues – in an echo of Ahmed's (2004b: 4, 91) work on affect discussed in *Chapter Seven: Veganism as a Practice of Affective Witnessing* – that 'sticky attachment' is always 'open to mutation'.

What eventually comes together through this process-oriented thinking is, she suggests, always more-than-human. Non-human actors – including animals, ideas and data – have the capacity to act, effect change and challenge anthropocentrism. This produces a focus on the relations between the entities that stick to each other and are entangled as they emerge and dissipate, rather than the substance of the entity itself. Therefore, to suggest that the vegans in this study who contest anthropocentrism are -centric towards something else instead forces enclosure upon the suggestion that vegans are entangled in the lives and worlds of other animals. Their affective modes of being are, if -centric at all, polycentric: relational, constantly emerging and reshaping in relation to other human and non-human bodies.

Having set out that vegans' entanglements in other-animal worlds are processual and emergent rather than fixed and static, it remains a challenge to propose that the vegans in this study had a clear guiding principle that shaped their philosophical beliefs. While I have argued that affect is central to the performative power of the vegan as witness, affect itself resists the very notion of centrality. I have claimed that vegans are anti-anthropocentric, but I am reluctant to offer a more positive -centric identification as an alternative. Perhaps a tentative suggestion would be to offer that the individuals in this study are post-anthropocentric. This understands post-anthropocentrism as complex and multidirectional, which thinks beyond an anthropocentric frame and towards a world of becoming (Braidotti and Bignall 2019: 1). As set out in *Chapter Three: The Research Journey*, I employed the practice of following (Marcus 1995: 105-106) in fieldwork as a methodological tool to follow the object of ethical belief. In later work, commenting on what he regards as the 'long decline' of social and cultural anthropology, Marcus (2008: 3) suggests that ethnographers engage with history unfolding in the present and to 'anticipate what is emerging'. This 'defining mode of temporality' is, he argues, more important than situating ethnography as 'being there'. In response to Marcus, Biehl and Locke (2010: 320) regard the theoretical productivity of anthropology as having the utility to explore how individuals navigate political and technological configurations – 'contemporary entanglements of power and knowledge' – and how to engage with the complexity of individuals' subjectivities. They propose that ethnographers 'consistently embrace unfinishedness'.

They add that in analysing what is processual, researchers should acknowledge that theories are always, inevitably, incomplete. In relation to my findings, a declaration of what vegans' guiding principle is, and how it should be defined, remains similarly incomplete. In their emergent, dynamic entanglements with the other worlds of animals, vegans' affective modes of belonging and becoming are in process.

9.3 Transformation and communication

This chapter has illustrated some of the ways in which vegans hope for a vegan future not by necessarily privileging the wonder of animals but by engaging with the bleak enormity and scale of oppression that humans inflict upon animals. To end, I will suggest that as part of veganism's orientation towards the future, vegans experience – and communicate the experience of – transformation. In this sense, veganism is a performative expression of transformation. As part of this transformation, veganism carries the potential to remake not only the self, but also remake the world. Images of transformation, such as those used in vegan activism, are important in this transformation. Social media images that communicate the transformative potential of vegans can act as what Rebecca Coleman (2013: 2), in her study of the temporality of images, describes as an affective appeal to the future. This transformation is in part communicated through elements of vegan testimony, such as images used in social media activism. While these images can convey a certain optimism, for example through the promise of better health, images may also depict the realities of violence towards animals. This tension brings an uncertainty to vegans' affective appeal to the future. While vegans present the potential of living in a world free from oppression against animals, they may doubt if this future is attainable.

This perspective on vegan transformation is formed from my conversations with vegans in fieldwork interviews, in which they related their individual stories of transformation. In *Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness*, these becoming-vegan stories were presented as political and action-oriented witnessing narratives. The argument that vegan transformation is communicated performatively is also shaped

by my standpoint as researcher: as a non-vegan encountering veganism for the first time through watching social media content. As already discussed in *8.5 The researcher as potential witness*, my response to vegan digital testimony informed how I came to analyse veganism as a relational, affective practice. This underlines the argument presented here that vegans communicate affective promise about the future. I experienced this promise through fieldwork, through listening to the stories of research participants. These narratives communicated the potential that I, too, could transform myself by becoming a vegan. Affective promise was also communicated in certain social media content encountered during fieldwork. Such content was not the hard-hitting footage of animal exploitation that has been described in preceding chapters, but its flipside: the activist campaigns that convey hope and the social media content that communicates the twin potentials of improved wellbeing and reduced environmental impact through becoming a vegan. In this type of content, images and graphics are employed to present veganism as a personal and ecological choice that reduces harm both to the individual, to humanity and to the more-than-human. For example, the marketing collateral for the annual UK campaign Veganuary, which encourages people to adopt a vegan lifestyle for one month in January, employs a colour palette of pink, green and orange, as well as a cursive typographical style. It signifies aspiration to health and wellbeing, for example through its attractive depictions of fresh produce, such as carefully arranged vegetables and pulses, which emphasise the beneficial effects of eating a plant-based diet. The Veganuary campaign also depicts veganism as a compelling way to tackle climate change. Messaging is savvy and light-hearted. One poster in the campaign suggests a DIY approach to tackling environmental destruction. 'Take climate change into your own hands!' it reads, showing a green and pink graphic of a paint roller that looks like a corn cob. Animals are featured, but never in pain or suffering at the hands of humans. Instead they are portrayed as cute and biddable, often framed by slogans that exalt kindness. The strapline 'If you can be anything, be kind' draws the eye to two images: one with a human hand stroking a piglet's back and another showing a human hand gently holding a lamb's neck as it sleeps with its head resting on a white pillow. Veganuary elevates the hope of animal life rather than the despair of animal death; in this promise lies transformation. Transformation begins in one's body, which can be optimised through not consuming animals. This act of kindness, the visuals suggest, can transform

the world for the better. This is exemplified in the words of another marketing strapline: 'A solution to climate change is at the end of your fork.'

The Veganuary campaigns are typical of a style of social media content that emphasises veganism as a healthy and ecologically sound lifestyle choice. This style of content was discussed in an interview with participant Amy, who had been inspired to become vegan by watching certain social media influencers who promoted these messages on their vegan lifestyle channels. She said that she had watched 'a lot' of these influencers and was particularly attracted to the content they produced, particularly what she regarded as their 'wholesome' lifestyles. These lifestyles conveyed love, Amy said, rather than causing pain or harm to other beings. She added that these influencers promoted a vision of equality – equality between humans and animals, and equality between humans. This, she said, prompted her to begin living as a vegan. In response to a question about whether she felt that the influencers that she watched spoke to her own values as a person, Amy's talked about her personal health, recounting that how, as a student, her diet consisted of noodles and chicken nuggets. Since becoming vegan, she now ate a diet with lots more fresh fruit and vegetables, which she said was because of watching certain vegan influencers. Amy said that after she watched these influencers' videos, she started to crave colourful food – hinting at the strategy of 'eating the rainbow' to improve one's diet (Minich 2019) –and she desired to eat what the influencers were eating, because the food looked so appealing in their videos. She reiterated that these influencers were important to her, because they promoted love and respect between all sentient beings. When asked what this model of respect could have the potential for, Amy said a vegan world would be a happier world. Her own experience of becoming vegan was that she felt happier herself, because she no longer felt guilt about what she was consuming. If a vegan world became a realistic prospect, Amy said that she thought the world would be a better place, because if humans extended love and respect to all sentient beings, then humans would express more love and respect for each other. Amy shows how becoming vegan, as an act of transformation, involves a refashioning of the self that also holds the potential to transform others. While Amy emphasises the role of social media influencers in remaking her own body through the consumption of

wholesome, colourful food – and with it the promise of health and happiness – Amy also uses her transformed body as a site for imagining how her consumption practices can play a part in a reimagining of the world as more respectful and compassionate.

Throughout this thesis, vegan transformation has been conveyed through employing the figure of the vegan witness, who undergoes a transformation of the self before seeking to transform others through their testimony. Vegan transformation sits in a wider context of sociological literature about transformation and temporal orientation towards the future. As already noted, Coleman (2013: 1-3) has identified the significance of transformation in Western social and cultural life, such as contemporary television programmes that employ the transformation of one's life or one's appearance. What Coleman calls an imperative of transformation therefore makes transformation an organising feature of contemporary social life. This transformation, she suggests, is an affective condition that is lived and felt intensely. Coleman is concerned with how images and attention to screens establish and reproduce transformation, particularly how images are affective because they appeal to the future and promise to materialise the body 'into something better'. Coleman adds (2013: 23-29) that images of transformation address the ways in which a better future is hoped for and dreamed about. Images, understood as potential, engage the body through an affective intensity of feeling. As illustrated in Amy's story, images of transformation – the vegan lifestyle videos and Instagram feeds that play a part in making her a vegan – promise to materialise the body into something better. The feelings of love and respect that Amy experiences through watching this content are Amy's affective condition, which she lives out by becoming and being vegan. She indicates how vegans, through their actions as witnesses, experience transformation and then performatively and affectively communicate their transformation to a future self, and a future world, to others.

This chapter has shown how vegans, in their affective relationship to the future, performatively communicate the potential of transformation. While this future can be experienced as hopeful, it can

also be experienced as existential uncertainty. The imagined vegan future, as has also been argued, is not anthropocentric. Vegans decentre the human by orienting themselves to other-than-human animals. As witness figures, their testimony is directed towards the future, recognising the entanglement of all sentient animals and rejecting the past and current dominance of humankind over non-human animals. The affectivity of vegan testimony – how vegans are affected and how they subsequently seek to affect others – attends to the not-yet, to the potential of how becoming vegan can transform the world. In the context of the Anthropocene, vegans' affective engagement with the future sees them bearing witness to the future, calling on others to take action upon both the oppression of other species and impending environmental collapse.

10 Conclusion

10.1 Findings of the research

Having chosen the case study of veganism to explore philosophical belief in this thesis, my research was guided by two principal lines of enquiry. Firstly, I sought to explore how this belief is acquired, formed and then transmitted to others. Secondly, I investigated to what extent vegan belief is shaped by media practices – specifically, what one creates and consumes through social media content. These two aims were achieved by engaging with the social media outputs of vegan activists using digital ethnographic methods, as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with activist content creators and their audiences. My subsequent findings are grouped into four main arguments: veganism is a performative philosophical belief; affect is intrinsic to the performative power of vegan belief; social media co-constructs vegan belief; and vegan belief is oriented towards a transformative, yet uncertain, future.

Finding one: Veganism is a performative philosophical belief

Veganism is a performative, action-oriented philosophical belief. In labouring to engineer the uptake of their ethical message to others, the participants in this study are engaged in producing a social reality created through language and action. Some research participants work to produce truth claims about veganism, which disrupt normative discourses concerning the consumption of animals. Having produced this truth, vegans then seek to transmit this truth to those who are not vegan. The affective transmission of vegan truth seeks to elicit a response from those who are addressed. In moralising the future actions of others, vegans call on others to take action against the oppression of animals. This leads to potential further transmission of philosophical belief, which may re-establish vegan truth in the presence of new potential co-witnesses.

Finding two: Affect is intrinsic to the performative power of vegan belief

Through analysing the data gathered in this study through employing the frame of witnessing theory – and subsequently establishing the figure of the vegan witness – I have argued that the circulation of affect in vegan testimony is integral to the process of becoming vegan and subsequently transmitting vegan belief to others. Vegans' beliefs are shaped by their intensely relational encounters with animals, which break the boundaries between human and non-human bodies. Following this, vegans communicate the relationality of human and non-human bodies in their affective transmission of their beliefs to others, through testimony that 'sticks' (Ahmed 2004b: 4, 91).

Finding three: social media co-constructs vegan belief

Social media are important conduits through which vegan belief is acquired, sustained and transmitted. Although philosophical beliefs concerning veganism can be transmitted in a number of ways that do not involve media – such as the vegans in *6.1 Ethics shaped by conflict*, who refuse to sit at any table where animals are being consumed – social media channels act as dynamic, affective spaces in which beliefs about veganism are circulated. In arguing that affect is central to vegan belief, I use the device of the digital sensory encounter to argue that vegan testimony is made powerful through the ways in which it employs the fabrics (Kuntsman 2012: 1) of digital culture, such as comments, emoji and hashtags. Such elements of digital culture, deftly employed by vegans in their activism, bring veganism as a philosophical belief into being. The affective and sensory power of vegan testimony is no less powerful for being communicated in online spaces. Indeed, while veganism as a philosophical belief is co-constructed with media, this does not treat the media as a separate entity. The social itself is shaped through media (Couldry and Hepp 2017: 1) and veganism as a philosophical belief is shaped through what one sees and does online.

Finding four: Vegan belief is oriented towards a transformative, yet uncertain, future

The transformative potential of vegan belief is oriented towards the future. This future is also experienced with a sense of existential uncertainty. Research participants' stories of transformation convey the affective potential to transform themselves as individuals while also seeking to transform the world through the liberation of animals. In this affective relationship to the future, however, vegans must engage with uncertainty. For example, they may doubt if a vegan world can be achieved, or may acknowledge the potentially unsuccessful transmission of their belief to others. In contesting anthropocentrism, vegans draw attention to what the world could be through radically decentring humans.

10.2 Contributions of the research

This thesis contributes to, and builds upon, existing sociological research through offering an in-depth analysis of veganism as a philosophical belief. Through employing novel use of theoretical models and digital methods, the thesis develops scholarship concerning the religion or belief section of the Equality Act 2010, while also contributing to scholarship exploring what it may mean to be non-religious. These contributions are explained below.

A more nuanced understanding of belief in the Equality Act

This thesis assesses the belief aspect of the religion or belief legislation in Section 10 of the Equality Act 2010, in which belief means 'any religious or philosophical belief and a reference to belief includes a reference to a lack of belief'. The *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* ruling of 2020 presented an opportunity to offer a scholarly contribution to sociologists of religion by producing an in-depth study of veganism as a protected characteristic. While this small-scale qualitative study means that the results are not generalisable to all vegans, the research nonetheless demonstrates the seriousness and cogency of veganism as a philosophical belief and how it constitutes a substantial aspect of human life and behaviour, as defined in the Equality Act. Furthermore, I have

developed the legal, immaterial definition of philosophical belief and imbued it with embodied and affective meaning.

Methodological contribution

As discussed in *Chapter Three: The Research Journey*, the research project did not start life as an investigation of philosophical belief. Early in the research process, my experiences of being a non-religious individual seeking existential guidance through my social media activities had led me to ask 'what do non-religious people do online?'. Later, working through the potential methodological dilemma of how to research non-religion through the lens of religion, I built on Beaman's (2017) empirical work with conservation volunteers to trace the contours of religion and non-religion, and the relationship of these categories to one another. Through the site of philosophical belief, I approached a small facet of non-religion without recruiting individuals that explicitly identified as non-religious. Thus, while my study illustrates some of the ways in which individuals position themselves in relation to religion and non-religion, the most salient aspect of their identification is in how they position themselves, as human subjects, in relation to other sentient animals. I developed this analysis through drawing on affect theory (for example, Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 3) to show how vegans' bodies are pulled beyond themselves to become webbed in relations with other, non-human bodies. To become a vegan, I have argued, is to become entangled in the worlds and subjectivities of non-human animals.

Additionally, my research has sought to investigate a small facet of what it may mean to be non-religious and to contribute to methodological developments in how this is studied empirically. In response to criticism about the category of non-religion, Lee (2015b: 194) has acknowledged that the category may be limited in its application – 'essentially arbitrary […] historical and contingent' – and that non-religion may be a 'placeholder term' that can nonetheless generate new empirical work. In employing non-religion as a placeholder term in my study, I have developed empirical work that considers how individuals position their philosophical beliefs by employing concepts such as

transformation and truth. *Witnesses to the Future* shows how the philosophical belief of veganism sits in relation to religiously inflected concepts, while being distinct from them. This responds to Lee's proposal that non-religion sits in contradistinction – in contrast – to religion and how non-religion can be characterised by its relation to religion but distinct from it (Lee 2015b: 32). Employing ethical veganism to explore a small facet of the complexity of what it means to be non-religious has facilitated, in turn, a deeper understanding of the category of philosophical belief in its lived, embodied, affective and mediatised forms.

Problematising philosophical belief

My methodological approach gave participants agency to situate their philosophical beliefs – or, in some instances, to dispute the notion of holding a belief – in the context of the recent *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* ruling. Although my participant recruitment materials (such as the information sheet and consent form) stated that my fieldwork was to explore veganism as a non-religious philosophical belief, I came to see this as an assumption that was not borne out by subsequent discussions with interview participants, in which religious or non-religious affiliations were discussed alongside the 2021 Census question about religion. A methodological contribution of this study has been to problematise philosophical belief by giving research participants the agency to discuss their beliefs, or dispute whether they hold a belief, in the context of other aspects of their identities. While some participants identified as non-religious – atheist, for example – other participants discussed their philosophical belief in the context of other religious and spiritual practices, such as two participants who situated their veganism in the context of their interest in, or practice, of Buddhism (see *6.2 Dimensions of vegan truth and belief*).

Employing novel theoretical approaches

As well as its methodological contribution, this research project also highlights the utility of employing theoretical models that are sensitive to capturing the ways in which vegan belief is lived, embodied and felt. For example, in analysing participants' autobiographical reconstructions of becoming vegan

in *Chapter Five: Becoming a Witness*, I discussed these stories using DeGloma's (2010) concept of the awakening narrative to show how vegans' experiences of awakening, while echoing experiences of religious conversion, are also positioned in relation to the notion of being 'awoken' to social justice issues. I framed these stories of becoming vegan as witnessing narratives, which sometimes produced a vegan truth. In striving to make sense of participants' personal discoveries of what they articulated as a vegan truth, witnessing theory provided a rich framework in which to consider conceptions of truth and subjectivity. While veganism has received attention in human geography (Oliver 2022) and witnessing theory has been employed to explore human/animal relations (Gillespie 2016; Rosenfeld 2021), one of the disciplinary contributions of this thesis has been to use witnessing as a theoretical framework with which to consider how religious and non-religious concepts can be contiguous, in the context of investigating philosophical belief. Kelly Oliver (2001: 16) stresses the importance of witnessing's double meaning in both its juridical connotations, of seeing with one's own eyes, and religious connotations, such as testifying to that which cannot be seen. This conception of witnessing was particularly helpful in analysing veganism as a philosophical belief, since it is a legally protected characteristic yet is also a belief that is conceptually entangled (Strumos 2021: 1) with religion.

Employing digital methods to understand how belief is mediatised

In answering the research question of asking to what extent philosophical beliefs are shaped through media practices, my analysis drew on media witnessing theory to complement the positioning of vegans as witnesses who receive and transmit testimony concerning their beliefs. Media witnessing theory was used in conjunction with affect theory to develop what I call the digital sensory encounter, a mediatised mode of affective vegan testimony that bears witness to the suffering of animals and transmits vegan belief to potential co-witnesses. This analysis was made possible by employing digital ethnographic methods and showing how the digital sensory encounter can bring vegan belief into being. Through foregrounding innovative digital methods, my research shows the possibilities of how digital ethnography can help sociologists understand how beliefs are formed and transmitted through digital media interactions. Moreover, as detailed in *Chapter Two: The Research Context*, I

located a gap in the academic literature concerning the intersection of digital religion studies with non-religion studies. My research brings a digital perspective to non-religion scholarship, while also attending to how concepts such as belief, truth and transformation intersect with one's digital selfhood.

10.3 Implications for future research

The work presented in *Witnesses to the Future* indicates the potential of future sociological work in three main areas: to further understand the lived aspects of philosophical belief; to continue developing the application of affect theory in the study of religion and non-religion; and to better understand how individuals experience existential uncertainty and affectively orientate themselves towards the future.

Future developments in philosophical belief

My research has sought to understand the lived, embodied and affective dimensions of philosophical belief. The findings in this thesis could be developed to consider how expressions of other forms of philosophical belief are acquired, lived and felt by individuals. Given the complexity of discrimination laws in the UK, where philosophical beliefs are widely interpreted by employment tribunals and must be deemed to have a similar cogency to religious beliefs, sociologists of religion are well-placed to further explore how such beliefs are genuinely held and are expressed as a substantial aspect of individuals' life and behaviour. The definition of what a protected belief is for the purpose of the Equality Act 2010 is important, since it determines how people can act. However, the statute itself offers scant assistance as to what a religion or belief is, thus leaving the matter to be determined by tribunals (Patten 2024: 1-2). Further sociological work concerning philosophical belief is essential to develop understanding in this area, particularly in how the Grainger criteria are applied by tribunals. In *Grainger Plc and others v Nicholson* (2010), Tim Nicolson – who had worked as Head of Sustainability at a property investment company – claimed that he had been made redundant because of his beliefs concerning climate change. In an employment tribunal for unfair dismissal and

discrimination, Nicholson argued that his belief about climate change affected his lifestyle, such as his diet and how he chose to travel. Thus, he argued, his belief was not merely an opinion but deserved legal protection as a philosophical belief. In upholding the employment tribunal decision, the Employment Appeal Tribunal held that if a person 'holds a philosophical belief which is based on science, as opposed, for example, to religion, then there is no reason to disqualify it from protection by the regulations' (Croner 2009). The *Grainger* ruling set out the criteria for whether something qualifies as a philosophical belief. Since then, these criteria have been used in employment tribunals, including *Casamitjana vs League Against Cruel Sports* (2020). More recently, the application of the Grainger criteria received much attention in relation to the protection of gender-critical beliefs, with *M Forstater v CGD Europe and others* (2019). This failed in a test case at an employment tribunal in 2019, but was later appealed and upheld in 2021.The case attracted controversy, in particular regarding whether Maya Forstater's beliefs – including the belief that a person cannot change their biological sex – were worthy of respect in a democratic society. (See Cowan and Morris 2022 for a critical account of the application of discrimination law in relation to this case.) Beliefs concerning popular movements and current trends will continue to develop over the coming years and the application of the Grainger criteria will be made on a case-by-case basis in what is a fluid area of law (Finniear 2023). Developments in the application of the Grainger criteria mean that further sociological work is essential to help understand – and critically interrogate – how philosophical beliefs are expressed and lived.

Developing affective approaches in the study of non-religion

A central claim of this thesis has been to stress how the circulation of affect is central to how vegans acquire and transmit their beliefs. While I have not claimed that veganism is a wholly non-religious belief, the work in this research project nonetheless addresses the lack of scholarly attention given to the embodied and affective aspects of what it may mean to be non-religious. As Scheer, Johansen and Fadil (2019: 2) argue, one reason why the embodied aspects of the secular have not been investigated more fully is because the secular is often represented in neutral, rational terms rather than affective and emotional terms (Connolly 1999). My thesis has not engaged with the 'secular' as

an object of study. Indeed, I concur with Beaman (2020: 245) in rejecting this contested term to describe the world-repairing (Woodhead 2016c) social actions of vegans and how they seek to create new modes for living well with non-human animals. However, the representation of the secular as rational risks missing what affect theory may be able to contribute to understanding the complexity of non-religion. The contribution of *Witnesses to the Future* to this scholarly endeavour has been to understand how a philosophical belief can be felt and embodied. While this work has addressed the research gap between digital religion scholarship and non-religion scholarship, it also indicates the potential for further sociological work to understand how affective experience and expression drives other forms of philosophical belief, as well as non-religious identities. If sociologists should continue to seek a more nuanced understanding of philosophical beliefs, as I argue, then this should be underpinned by investigating the affective aspects of belief, in particular how affect binds together social bodies (Ahmed 2004b: 9). Supp-Montgomerie (2015: 335-337) notes that employing affect theory in the study of religion is rendered difficult because of the lack of a singular affect theory. She offers a way of defining affect as the social energy through which subjects are 'produced, organised and undone', an interplay of social energy that is always in flux, in which subjects continually and contingently come into being. In *9.2 A rejection of anthropocentrism*, I showed how vegans, in expressing their belonging with non-human animals – as well as their interactions with non-human agents such as unseen algorithms – are entangled with others, and so contingently come into being with the more-than-human. This processual approach can potentially be used to develop further ways of thinking about how philosophical beliefs are produced and lived.

Sociological understanding of existential uncertainty

In the final empirical chapter of the thesis (*Chapter Nine: Vegans as Witnesses to the Future*), I suggested that vegans express an affective relationship to the future and that existential uncertainty – about the co-existence of humanity with other animals on a dying planet – is felt affectively. In making this point, I suggest that sociologists of (non-) religion should investigate further how individuals experience existential uncertainty and how they affectively orientate themselves towards a precarious future. My thesis drew on existing research such as Beaman's (2017) work with the

'world-repairing actions' of her sea turtle rescue volunteers, whose existential concerns were framed in what Beaman termed 'a world of wonder'. While developing my analysis of how research participants are engaged in such world-repairing actions, I sounded a note of caution to acknowledge the despair and uncertainty about the future that they articulated in interviews, in particular a deep concern for how humans and other animals live well together. There remains further scope for qualitative enquiry by sociologists of (non-)religion to explore further how existential uncertainty is felt, as well as performatively communicated to others, in the context of what Petrova (2024) describes as socio-ecological precarity.

In the same chapter, I analysed how vegans' ethical concerns are situated in relation to animals. This contributes to an emerging area of scholarship that is concerned with the entanglements between human subjectivity and non-human matter, including non-human animals. In the context of scholarship concerning the Anthropocene, the human and non-human binary is being disrupted (Caracciolo et al 2022: 6). This is an important area for sociologists of religion to develop in further research, potentially by evaluating the non-human turn in the context of individuals' beliefs concerning the natural world and humans' impact upon it. In developing Day's (2011: 44) identification of an anthropocentric belief orientation in the context of my research, I suggested that vegans hold beliefs that are anti- or post-anthropocentric. In employing witnessing theory, I have shown how vegans' philosophical beliefs 'confront the unspeakable' (Ibrahim 2020: 491) and respond to the oppression and suffering of animals. Their beliefs are political and action-oriented, challenging anthropocentrism and demonstrating the possibilities of a future world in which humans are decentred. While the sociology of human/animal relations has questioned the discipline's anthropocentric assumptions, which has developed the field of vegan studies, including sociological studies of veganism (Twine 2018: 167), sociologists of religion still have much to contribute to this field. For example, there is scope to explore other anti-anthropocentric beliefs that do not regard value as human-centred; likewise, a non-, anti- or post-humanist approach to disrupting the human subject could be employed to research social change (Tremlett 2021: 2-3). In its attention to the

performative and affective aspects of ethical selfhood, *Witnesses to the Future* contributes to moving forward this scholarly conversation.

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