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Queering Veganism: A Biographical, Visual and Autoethnographic Study of Animal Advocacy.

NATHAN DAVID STEPHENS GRIFFIN

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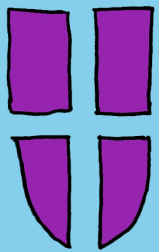
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QUEERING VEGANISM



A COMIC AUTOETHNOGRAPHY!

miaoww



NATHAN STEPHENS GRIFFIN



Written and Illustrated by
Nathan Stephens Griffin
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Chapter One:

EARLY.



I've been a vegetarian for twenty eight years. All of my life. Raised from birth.



As a youngster, it made total sense. Especially as we had a pet dog who I loved dearly.



I don't think I really considered the actual reality of meat til later.



In a way, not eating meat meant that I never had to.



One Christmas whilst we were both still in primary school, my sister and I were given membership for a young persons animal advocacy group as a gift.



Looking back, that was my first involvement with animal rights related activism. Our membership lapsed after a year.



The cafeteria staff at school misunderstood what my parents meant by the term 'vegetarian', so for a while I ate fish, I was too shy to say anything...



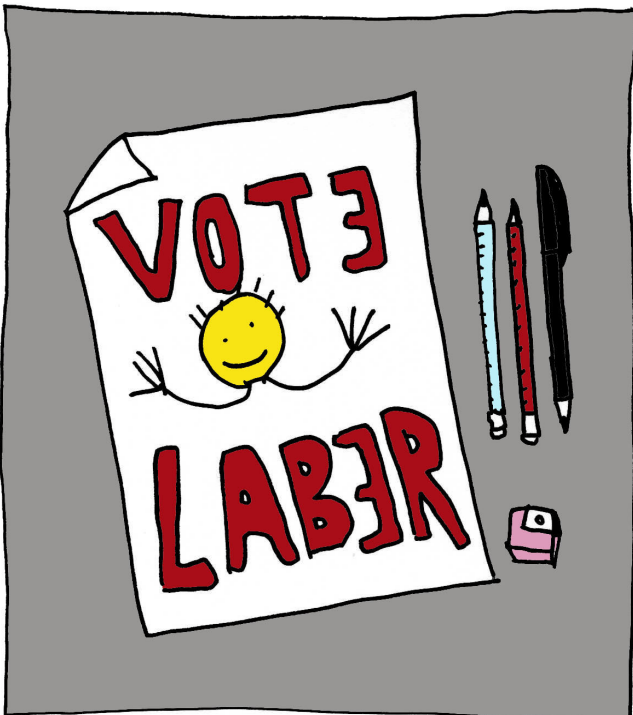
But eventually I found the confidence to tell them that I didn't eat fish either. My parents said we could eat what we liked but we stuck with Vegetarianism.



My parents had already been veggie for quite a while by the time I was born (they were sort-of hippies).



They've always been political and their vegetarianism is just one strand of the political socialization we received.

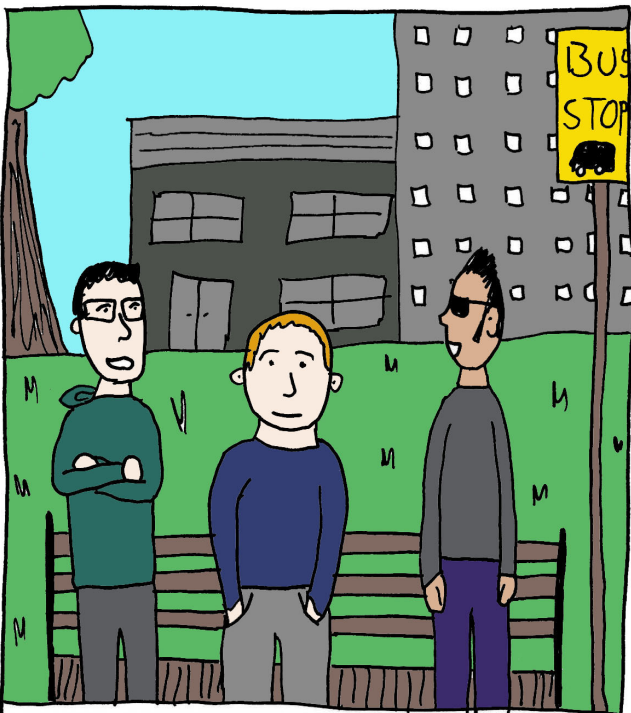


My dad often recalls me making campaign flyers for Neil Kinnock in 1992 (at six years old)



...and my Mam always reminds me that I attended Greatham Common Peace Camp in the womb!





As I grew older I remained an anomaly among my friends at school.



Is that all you're having?

Yeah, I'm not very hungry.

The topic of animal rights rarely came up, largely because I preferred it not to



Hooray! It's veggie pizza day!

woohoo!

I did eventually meet other vegetarians. The vast majority were female, at my school at least!



You should be supporting the troops!

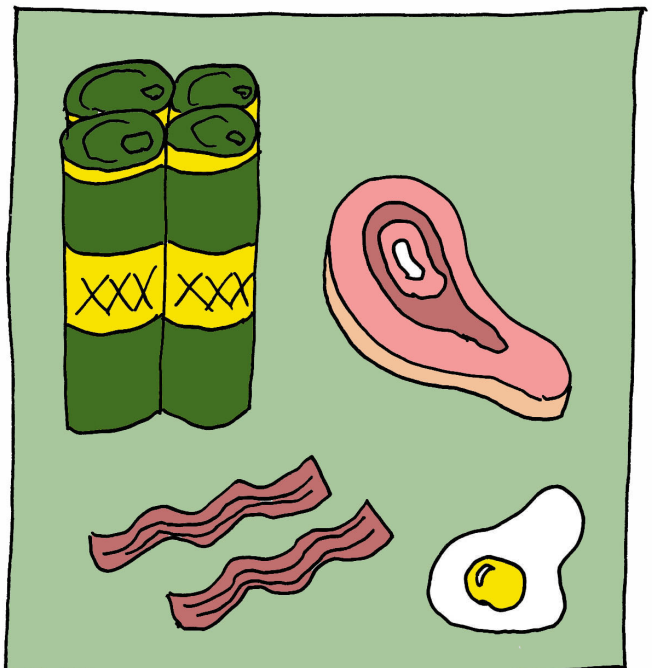
I Am!
I wanna bring them home!

Vegetarianism wasn't a big part of my identity, unlike various other political issues.





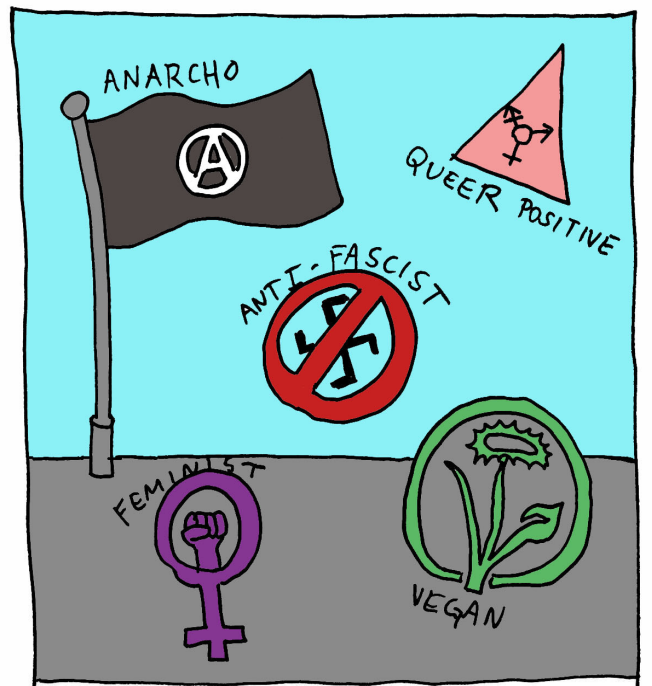
At university, I stopped drinking alcohol and started identifying as 'straight Edge'.



From that experience I quickly learned that I have pretty good will power. It probably laid the foundations for me making the leap to veganism.



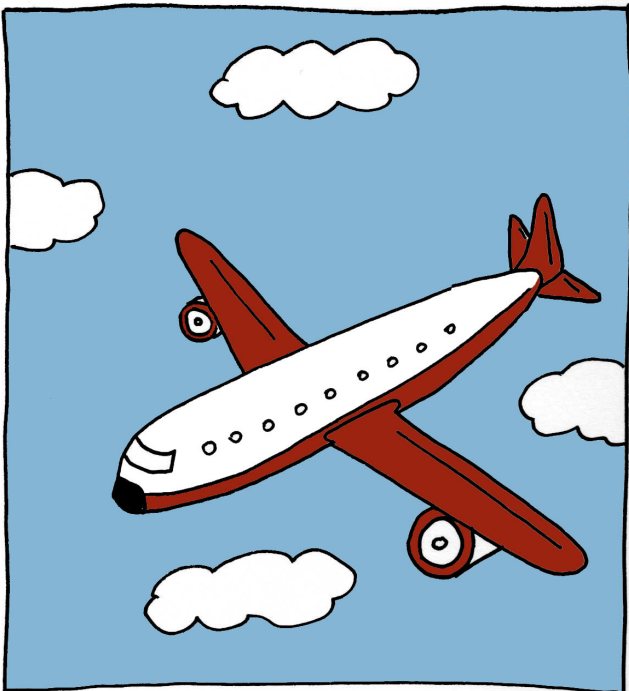
I went vegan whilst I was still at Uni, but I'll talk more about that later on.



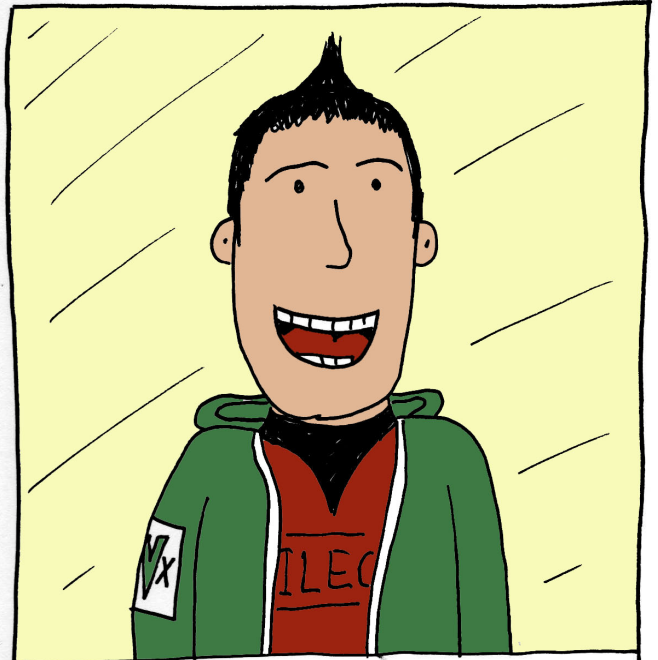
considering how early I started being vegetarian, it took a while for me to go vegan. Once the pieces clicked into place, it was inevitable!

Chapter Two

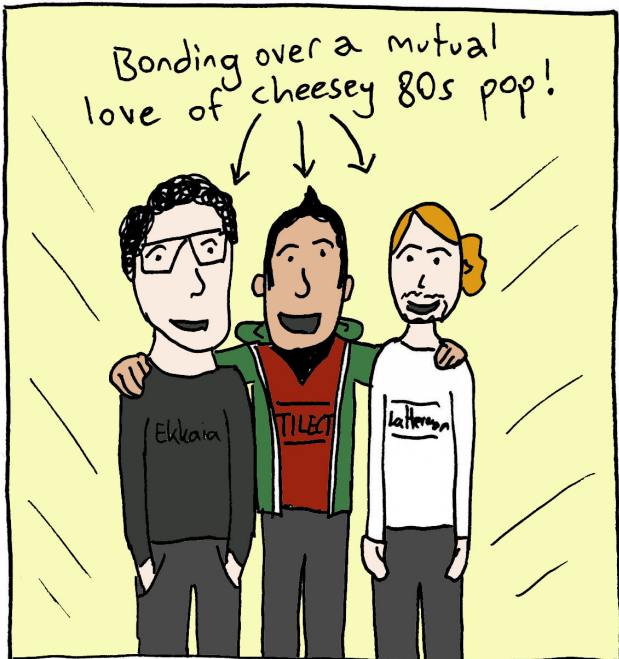
RECENTLY.



I'd been playing in bands for a few years when I got the chance to tour in Germany. I was 21, in my third year of university.

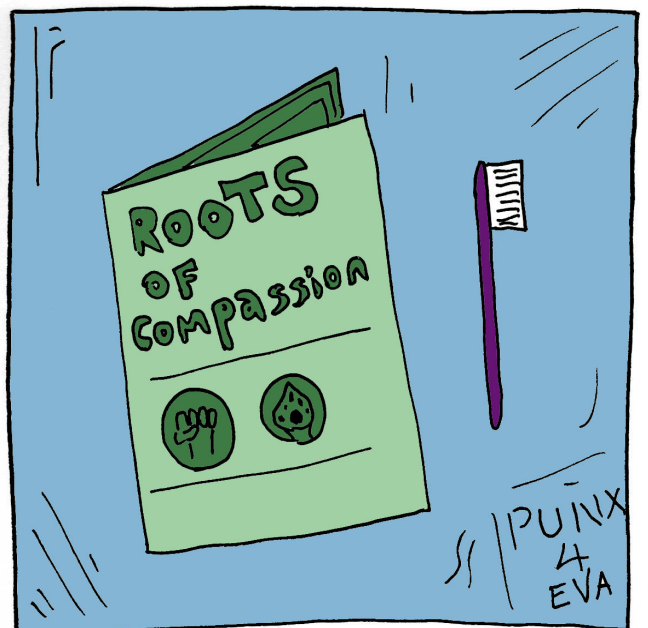


The person driving us around was straight Edge (like me), but also vegan and very politically active

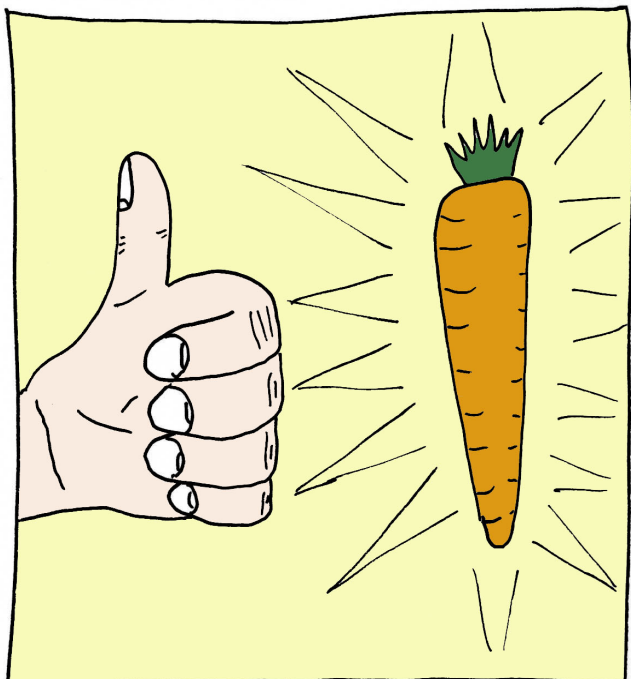


Bonding over a mutual love of cheesy 80s pop!

We decided to go vegan on tour as an act of solidarity and respect



His flat was full of zines about veganism & animal rights. (These included a comic called 'Road Trip' by JT Yost.)



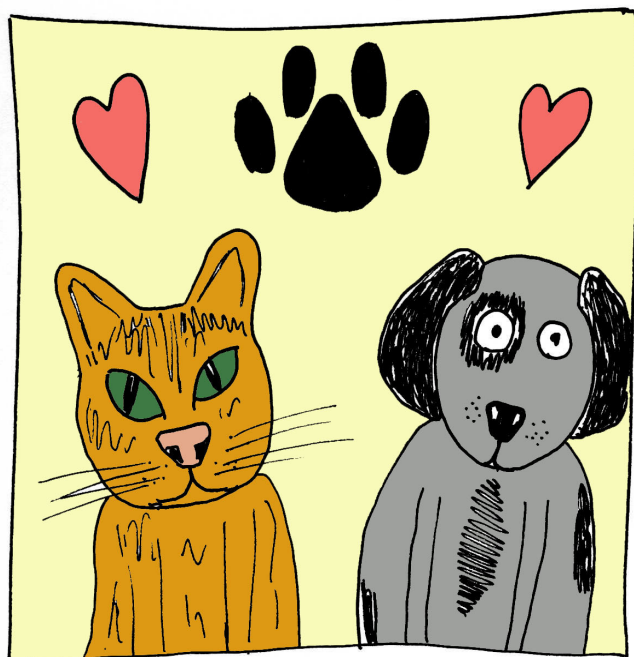
We learned a lot from those zines and from our new friend. We decided to stick with veganism



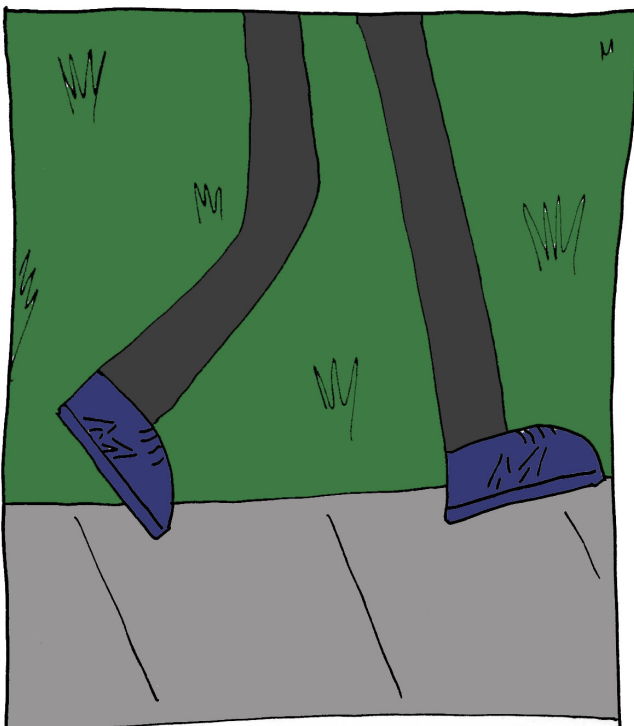
When we got home and told our friends, a few of them decided to do it too



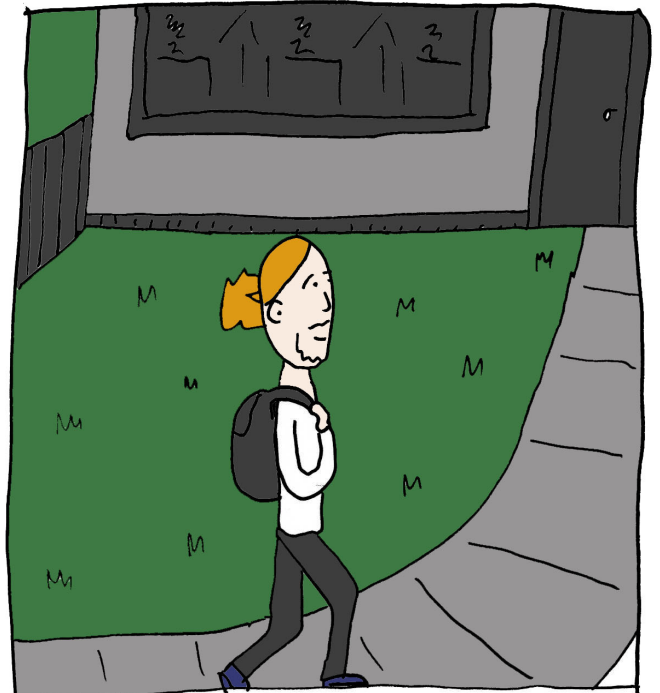
From that point on, we met a lot more vegans. Especially through touring.



We also got more involved in fundraising for animal advocacy causes, like local No-kill animal shelters.



At that time I started to engage more with identity politics, through my studies and elsewhere.



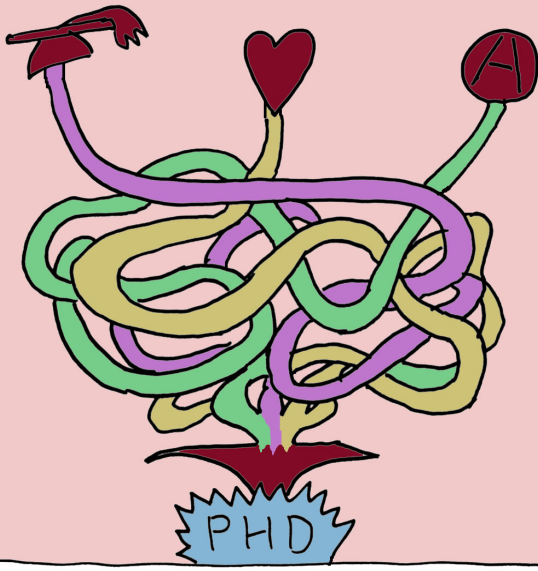
I started feeling more comfortable expressing my own gender and sexuality in less restrictive ways.



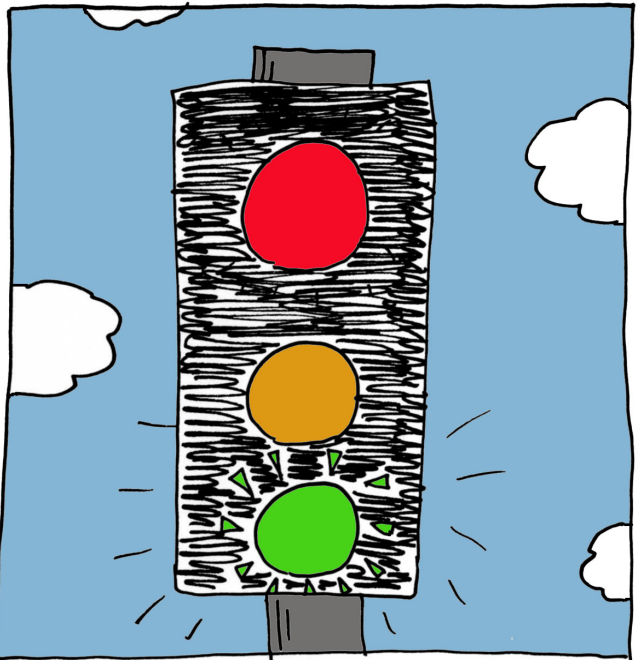
I discovered queer politics.



I studied 'politics' as an undergrad and, eventually, 'social research methods' at MA level.



For my MA thesis I did a project on veganism. It was a time when my academic, political and personal journeys were coalescing.



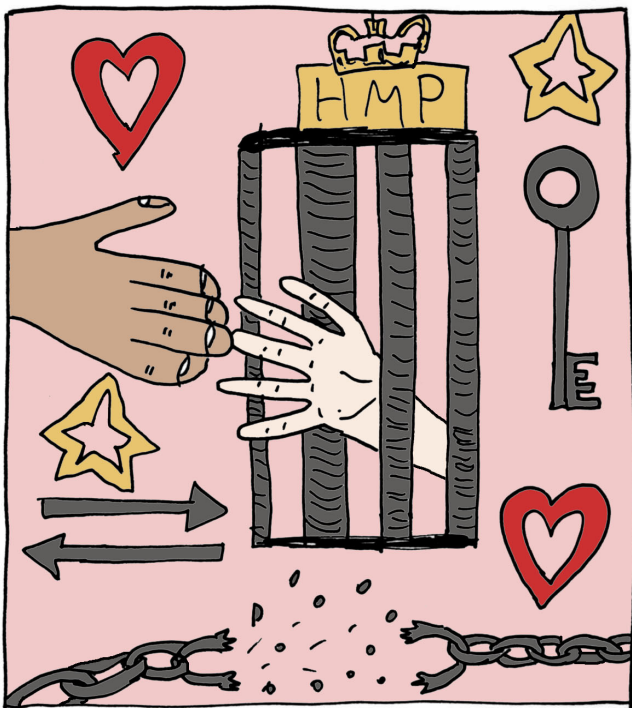
I wrote a PhD funding application based on ideas from my MA work and somehow it got accepted!



The project was unusual because it involved the use of visual methods and comics



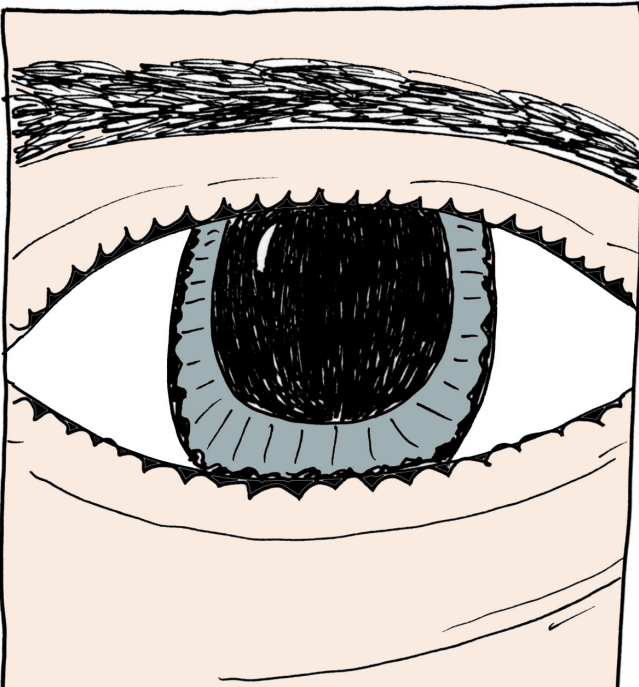
It also meant that I didn't have to worry about finding a 'real' job for a little while longer!



Outside of uni, I was working and volunteering for a local prison charity.



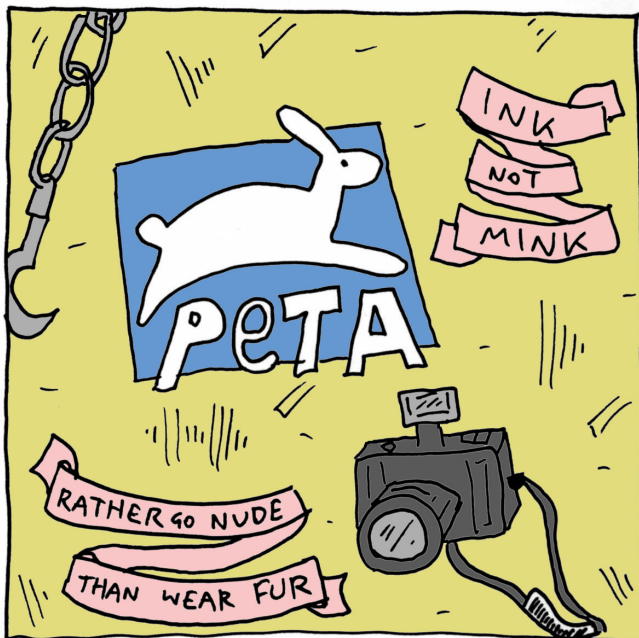
I got to know an activist who was serving a sentence in prison. We wrote to one another and once I went to visit them.



I started to see very clear links between these seemingly separate social and political issues.



For example, links between speciesism and sexism, as discussed in Carol Adams book 'The Sexual Politics of Meat'.



I became more critical of groups I had previously supported. For example PETA's use of sexism to promote Animal Rights causes.



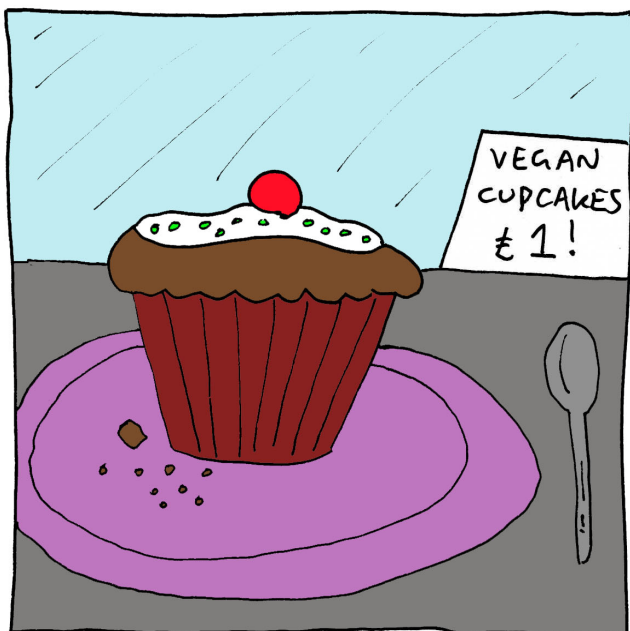
Eventually I stumbled across other academics who felt the same way, and became involved with disciplines like 'critical Animal studies'.



A couple of years after going vegan, I attended a hardcore punk festival in the Czech Republic, and met lots of cool Vegan punks!



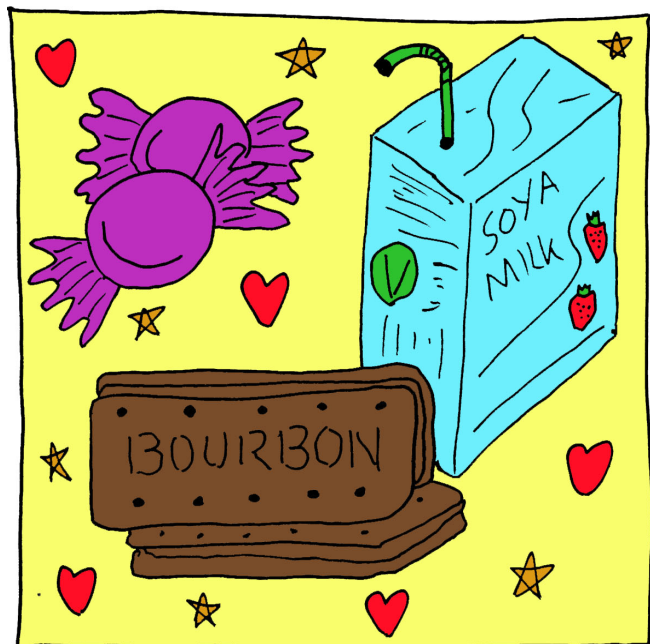
I felt like I was discovering veganism everywhere, expanding my horizons and making friends.



I wanted to seize on the feeling and contribute, so we began running a monthly non-profit vegan cafe at a community centre in town.



It was around this time I wrote my first song about being vegan. I'd written political songs before but always found it hard to write about Veganism, so I used Hannibal Lecter as a starting point!



I discovered lots of new treats that replaced old non-vegan ones. I found myself missing less-and-less.



Recently, I celebrated the six year anniversary of going vegan. I still feel like it's the best decision I ever made.

Chapter Three:

DAILY.



Being a vegan PhD student isn't incredibly noteworthy. Most of the time it has little impact.



But sometimes it really does. Like how it impacts on little things like going for a cuppa.

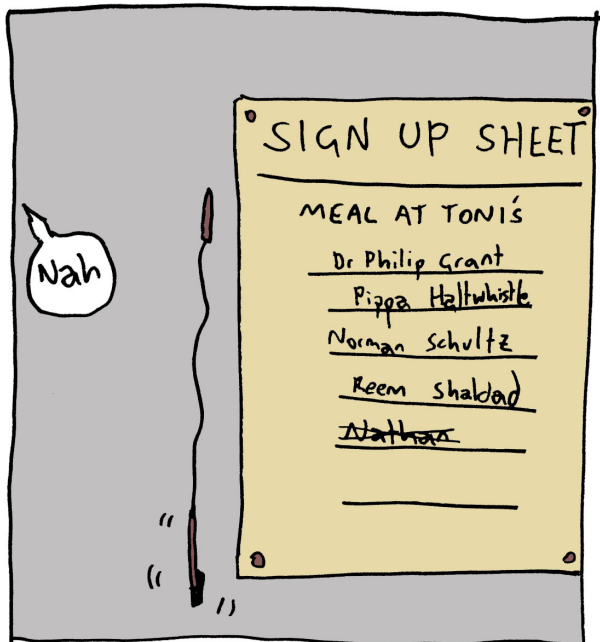


One thing it rarely impacts upon is teaching.

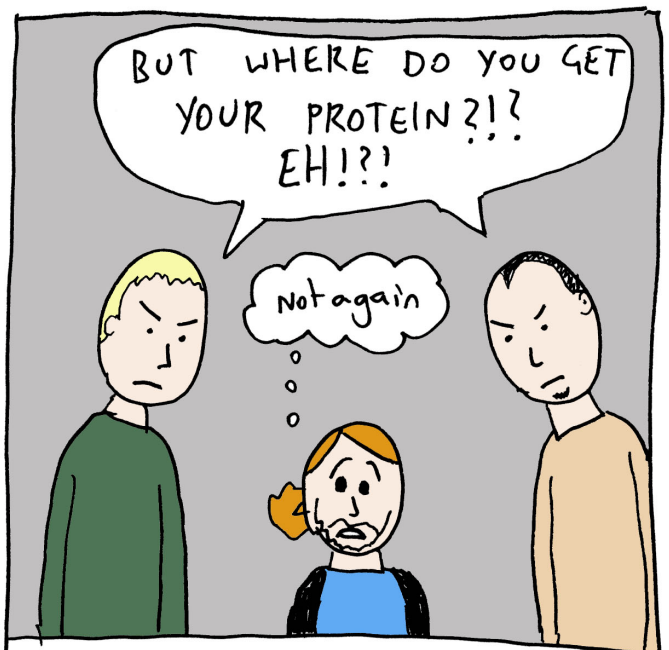


I've been doing teaching, part-time, for a couple of years now, and I really enjoy it.

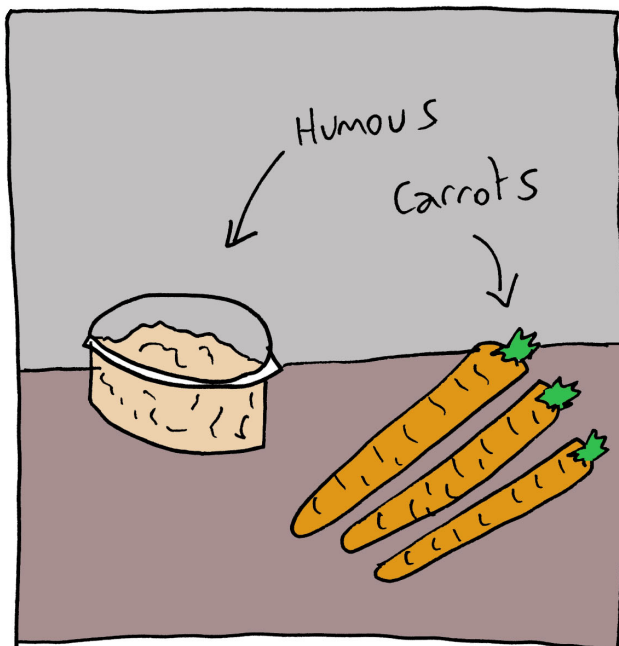




I tend to avoid meals with colleagues. It means I miss a lot of the typical post-conference social activities.



I get too stressed out and worry that there won't be anything for me to eat, or that everyone will look at me, or ask awkward questions.



This all probably sounds trivial, but it builds up when it's an ever present part of your day



I get by though. I could have it a lot worse, after all!



I once took part in a poster competition that was judged by someone who I knew to be very ardently in favour of vivisection.



He took one look at my poster and it was clear that he'd already made up his mind.



A small crowd gathered to watch our 'debate'.



Needless to say I didn't win... The competition, that is. (I held my own in the debate).



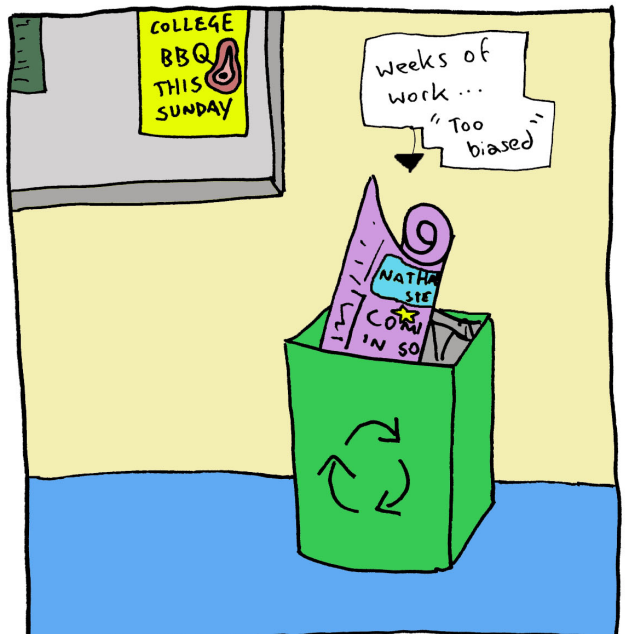
I was annoyed at the fact that he decided to keep his own bias a secret. pretty ironic!



I was too shy to call him on it. I wasn't expecting to win, but this seemed unfair.



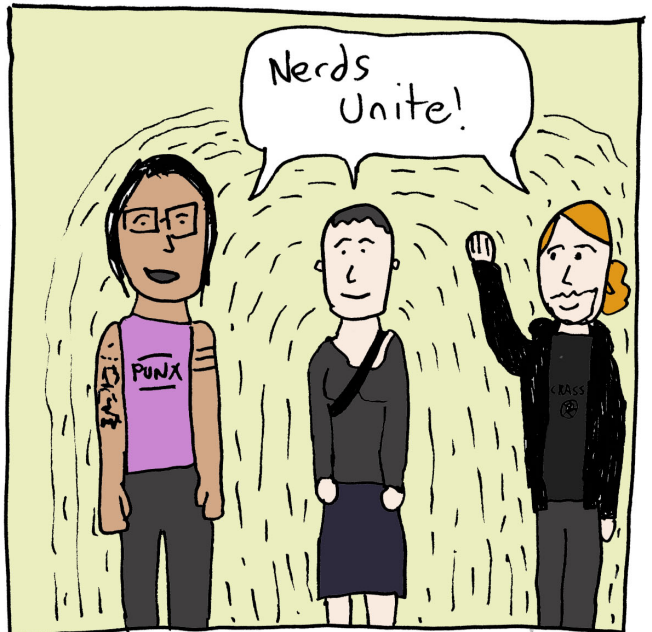
It struck me as a bit of a misuse of authority, or a conflict of interests, perhaps.



Either way, it was a rough experience.



It's times like that when I feel like a real out cast.



I have friends who understand but uni seems like a weirdly apolitical space



Colleagues are supportive but there's still that fundamental disconnect.



Thats why it's important to have likeminded folks to talk to. Even if they are miles away.

Hi Nathan,
How are things?



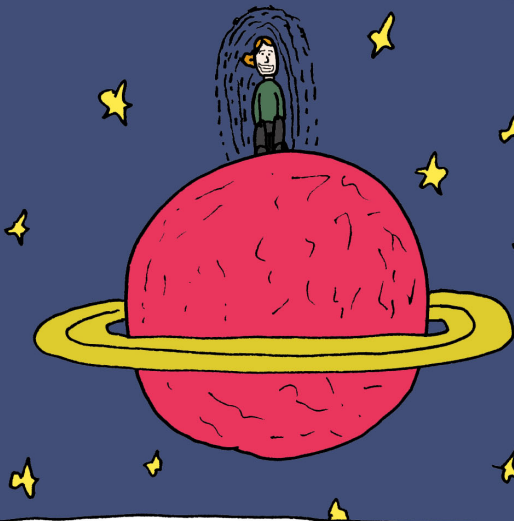
My supervisors are brilliant.

okay, I think.



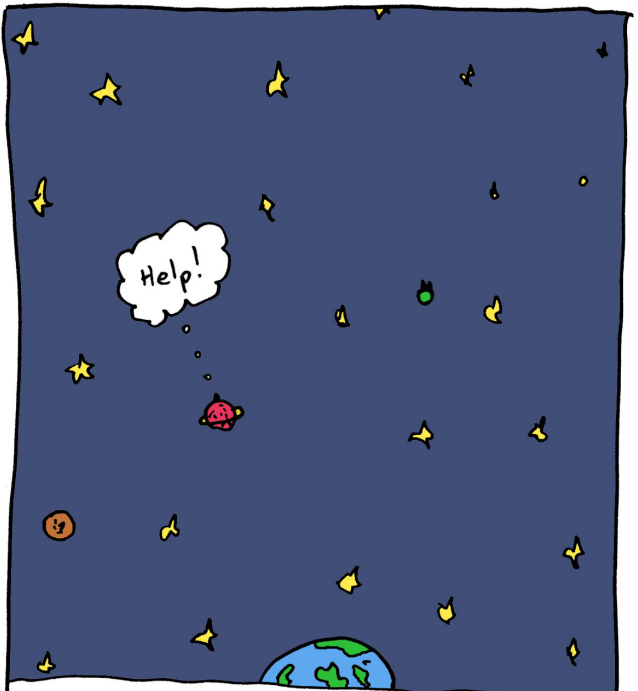
Really sympathetic and helpful.

That's good.



But ultimately doing a PhD
is a very lonely endeavor.

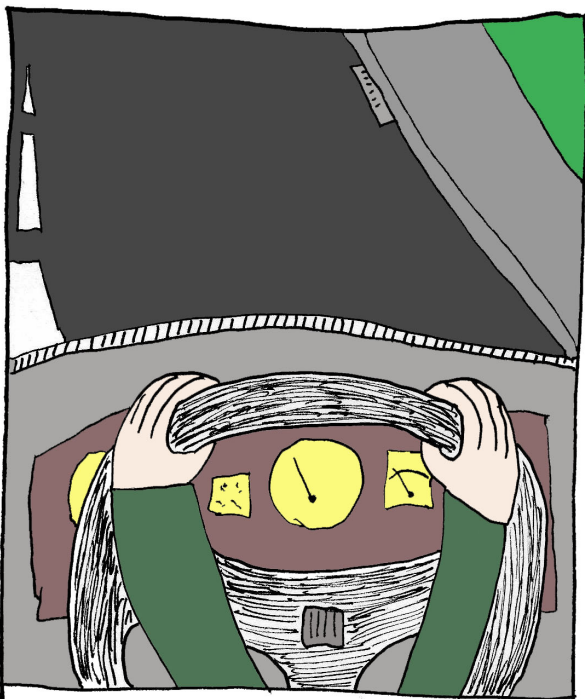
Help!



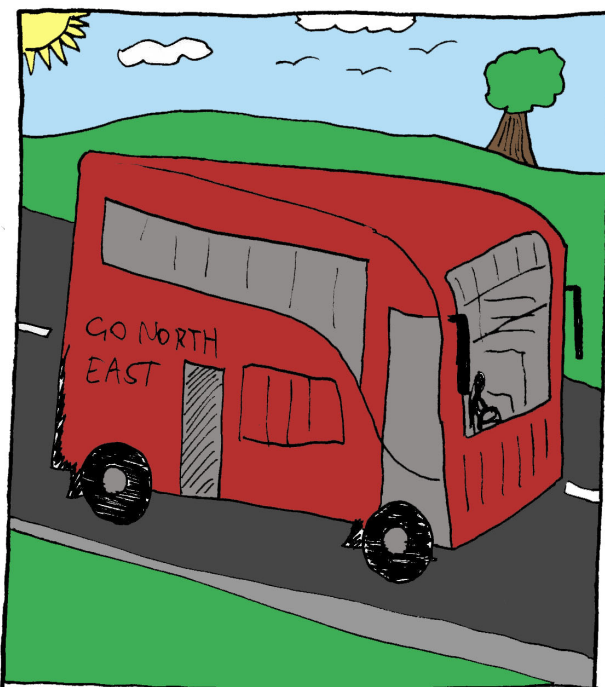
Sometimes more so when you're
vegan.

Chapter Four

MESSILY.



Fieldwork was a bit of a whirlwind, to be honest!



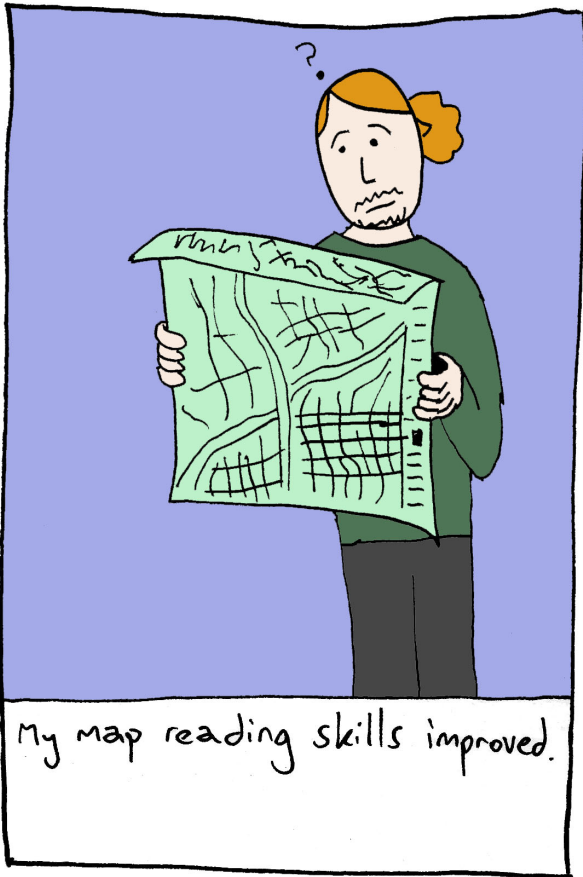
I did a lot of travelling up and down the country; driving buses and trains.



I met and spoke to lots of vegans and activists - some total strangers, others I'd met before.



Though it was mostly a success, it certainly wasn't all plain sailing



My map reading skills improved.



and I met a lot of different companion animals (or 'pets')



I spent a fair bit of time in Veggie cafés



and an equal if not greater amount of time at punk gigs.



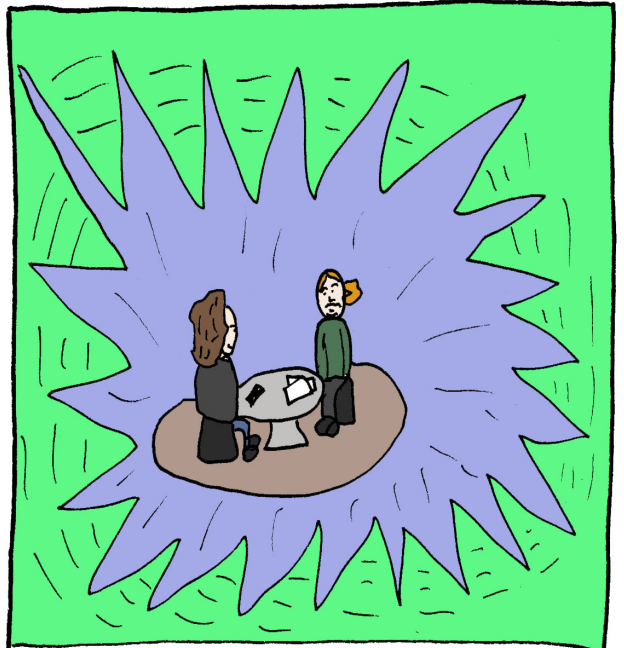
It was great having a dictaphone but some places were so noisy



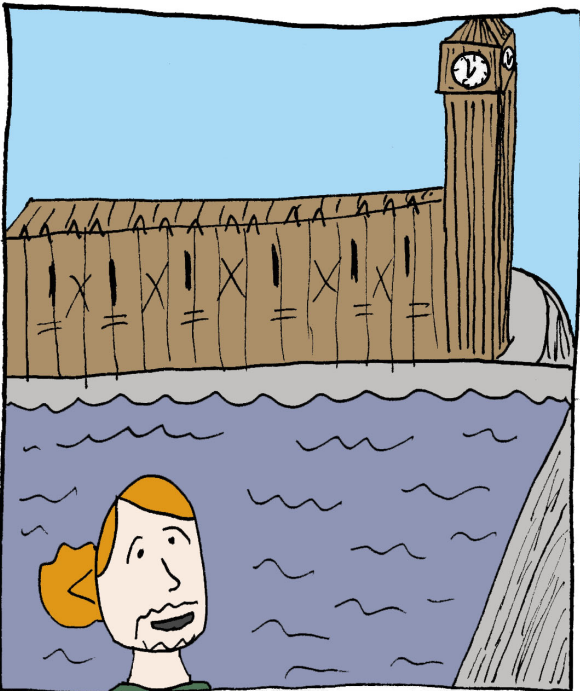
It made transcribing interviews a nightmare at times... I soon learned my lesson.



But sometimes I just had to go with the flow, and worry about it later.



Some interviews weren't used anyway - for various reasons.



At one point I found myself interviewing someone near Westminster in London.



whilst I was waiting I saw Ed Balls get stuck in a revolving door!



somehow I composed myself enough to conduct a successful interview.



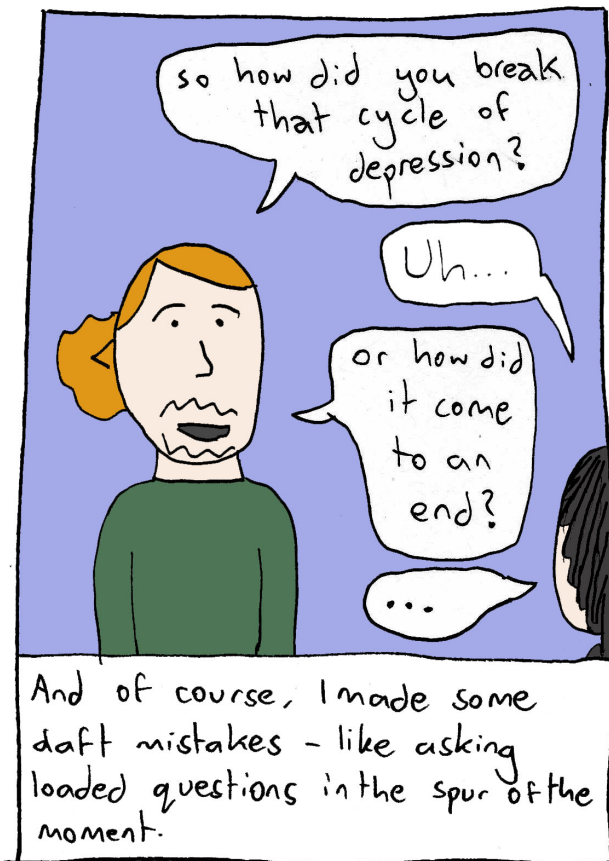
It felt like a very surreal day.



Some interviews didn't work out - in some cases participants were suspicious of me and of the project...



... which is totally understandable given what's been going on in the news.



And of course, I made some daft mistakes - like asking loaded questions in the spur of the moment.



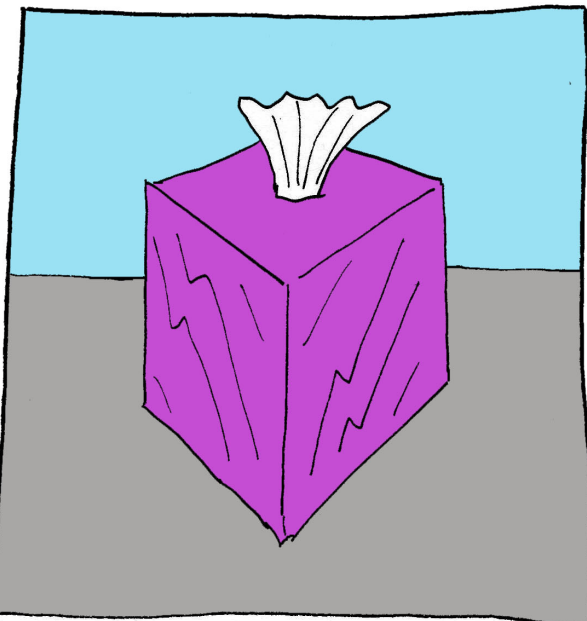
In those instances I tried to accept and acknowledge it and move on positively.



There were times when I got overwhelmed during Interviews, in particular I remember it happening whilst I was in London.



I was surprised afterwards by how exhausting it can be to do this sort of research. Physically and emotionally.



People would tell me deeply personal things about their lives. Even though they were willing participants - part of me still felt exploitative.



I guess that's why the notion of neutrality baffles me. Surely we have a duty to be compassionate, not dispassionate in those situations?

Hi there, it's Nathan from Durham...



Another problem I had was keeping people involved.

Just wondering if you'd had a chance to make a comic yet.



Many participants didn't end up submitting comics or taking part in the follow ups.

No sorry. Not yet



I can understand why, but it was still stressful to have people dropping out.

Fair enough

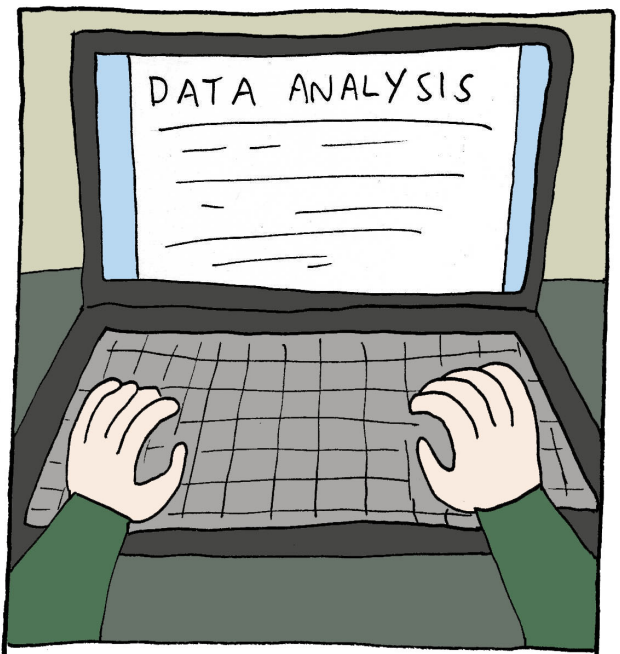


I can't help wonder how I could've done things differently to make it easier for them to contribute.



Paulo Freire

I wanted participants to have a say in the data analysis process.



But many didn't want to, making the project more 'conventional' than I'd envisaged it would be.



That's enough for today!

I think giving them an opportunity to participate at that stage was important in and of itself, regardless of whether they decided to take it.

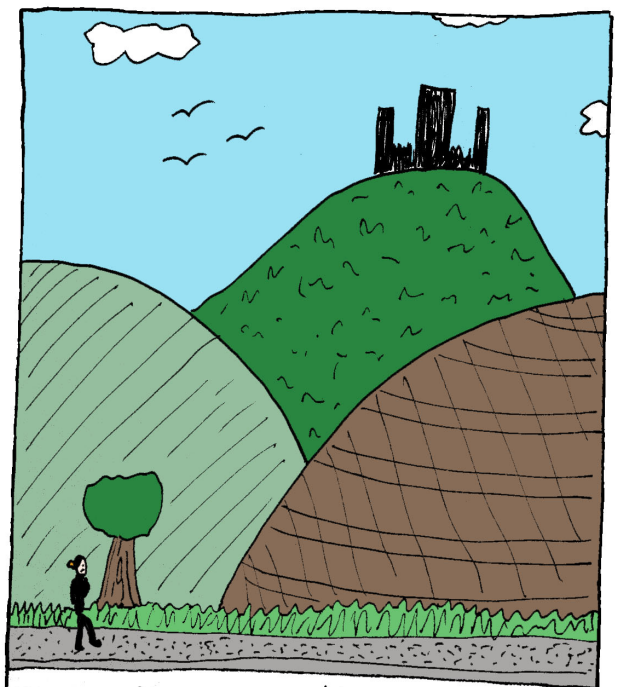


Just heading out for a walk. Back soon!

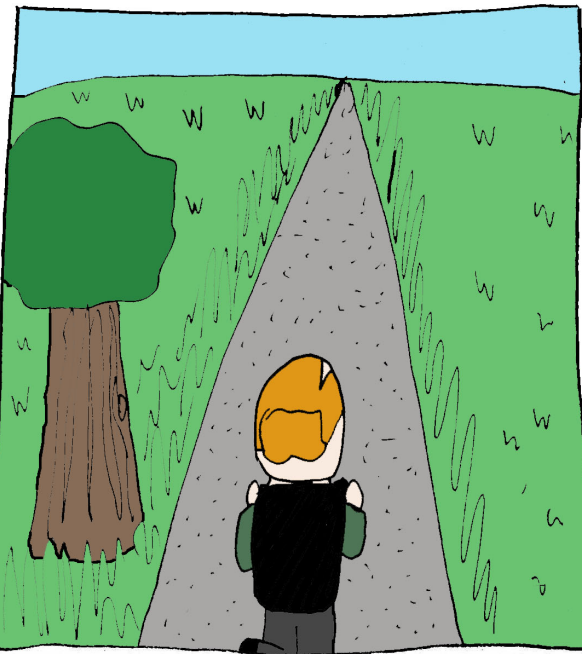
So I don't feel too down about it, having had time to reflect.



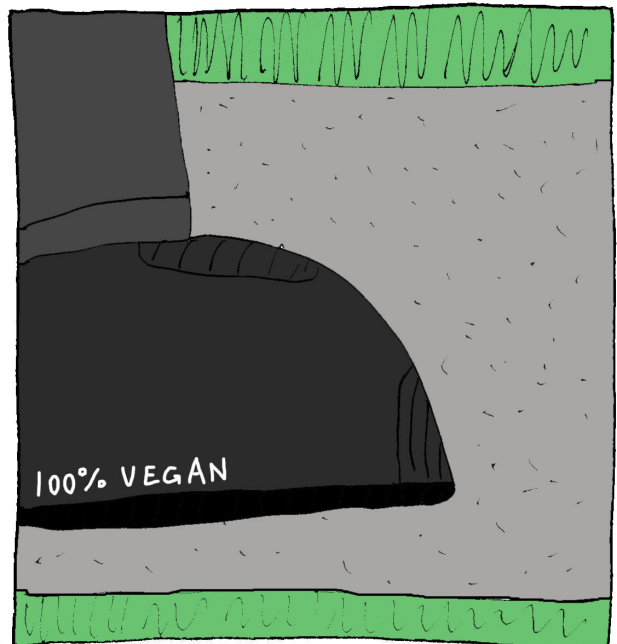
Overall, I feel like the fieldwork was a success.



I was trying something unusual and for the most part, it paid off.



Naturally there are things I'd do differently, were I to do it again.



But I also think that the parts of it that went messily, are what made it worthwhile in the end.

Chapter Five

ACUTELY.



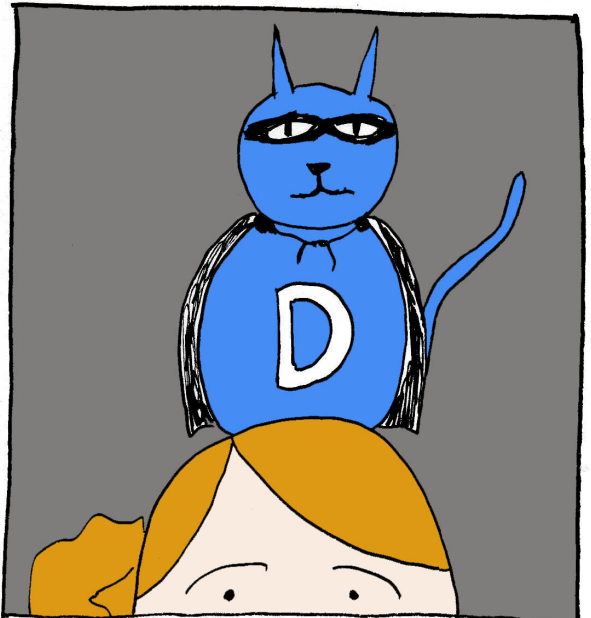
There's a part of the story that I've left out so far.



To start with I didn't feel it was relevant.



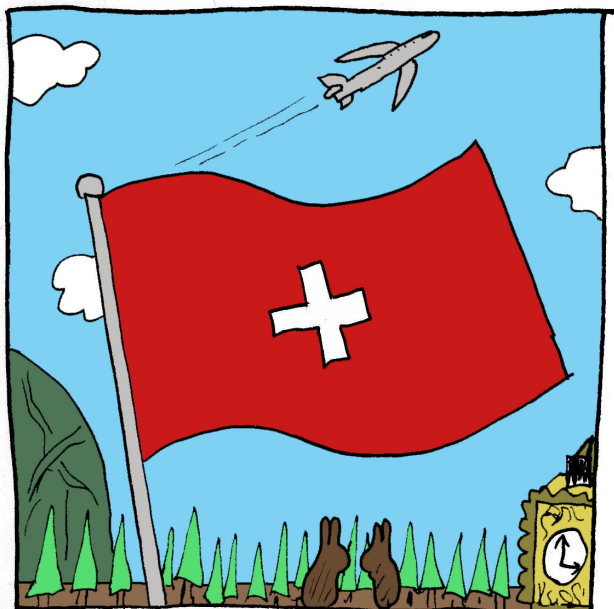
But the more the project has gone on, the more I realize how much of a crime of omission it would be to leave it out.



The thing I'm talking about, to put it bluntly, is my crazy brain.



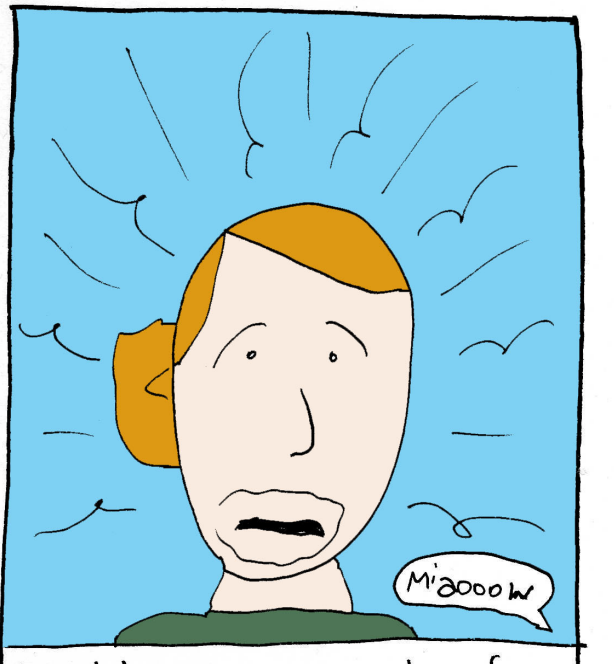
I was diagnosed with depression & anxiety not long after starting the PhD.



I'd suspected as much for a long time but only got the medical confirmation after an awkward event in Geneva, Switzerland.



I was attending the ESA conference, and presenting some work abroad for the first time.



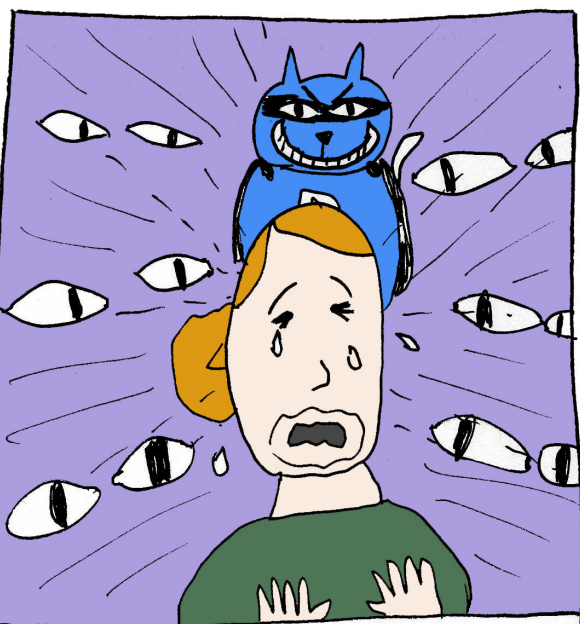
I had been on my own in a foreign country for almost a week, feeling very stressed and generally unhappy.



In spite of my worries, my presentation went fine. However, later on, at a social event, I got talking to a guy who really criticized my research



Normally I relish a debate and handle myself well, but this time something wasn't right. My heart was beating really fast and I felt like everyone was watching and listening in. I felt horrible.



Then, without warning, I burst into tears. I could not stop crying. It was incredibly embarrassing.



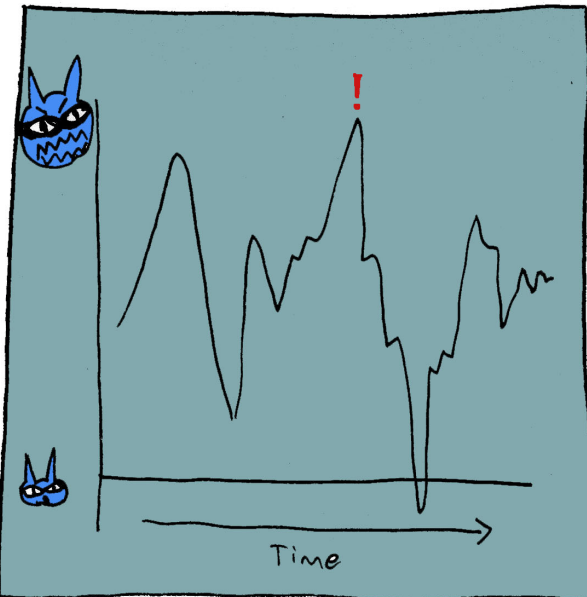
I thought "whos gonna hire a lunatic who can't have a debate without crying?"
I felt like my entire academic career was over then and there.



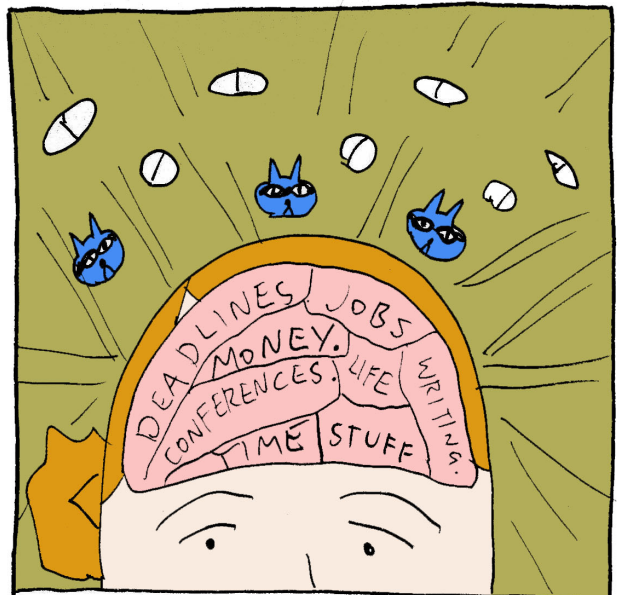
When I got back to England I booked an appointment with a G.P. They were nice enough and went through my options with me.



They prescribed my anti-depressants, which worked okay... I think. There was a six month waiting list for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. I just took the path of least resistance.



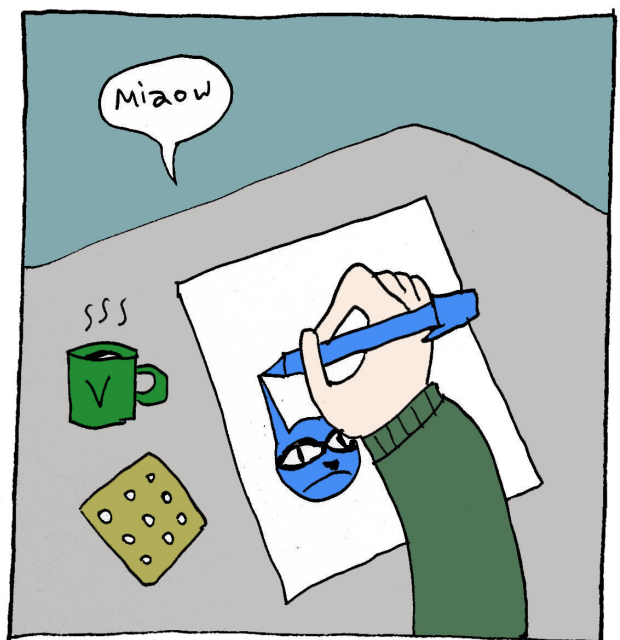
Things got better... and worse... and better again. It ebbed and flowed just like it always has, through my whole life.



The stress of doing a PhD just amplifies things a little, or makes you experience the effects more acutely.



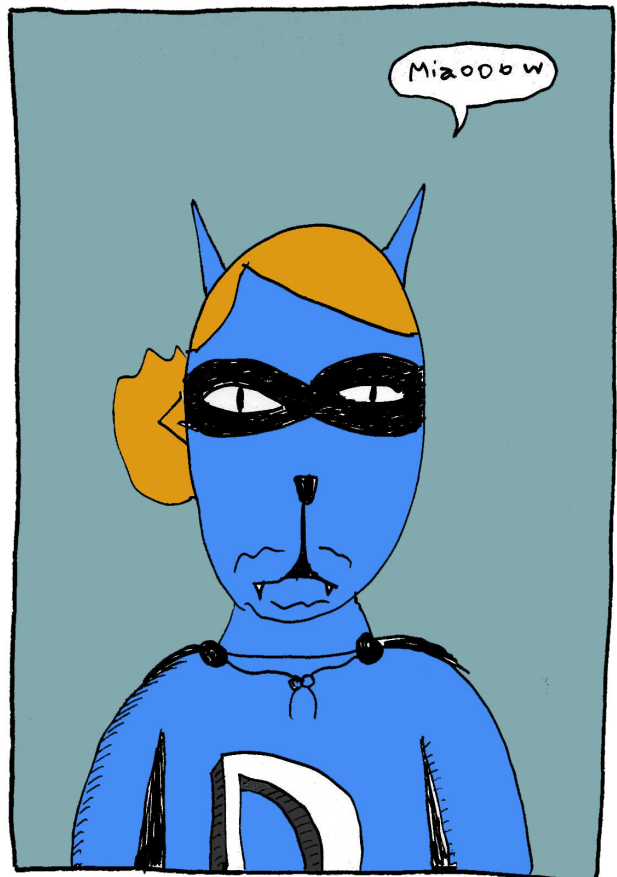
The first thing the doctor said was "it's going to be fine". In truth I think it's a bit more complicated than that.



It's something I'm always going to have to deal with and manage. It makes me who I am, and makes this project what it is.



There's no escaping it. Whether you notice it or not, it's there on the pages.

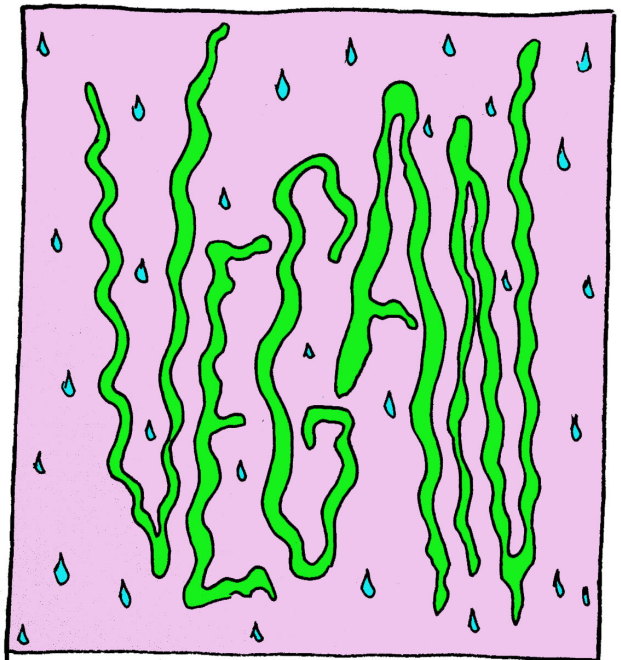


Chapter Six

SURELY.



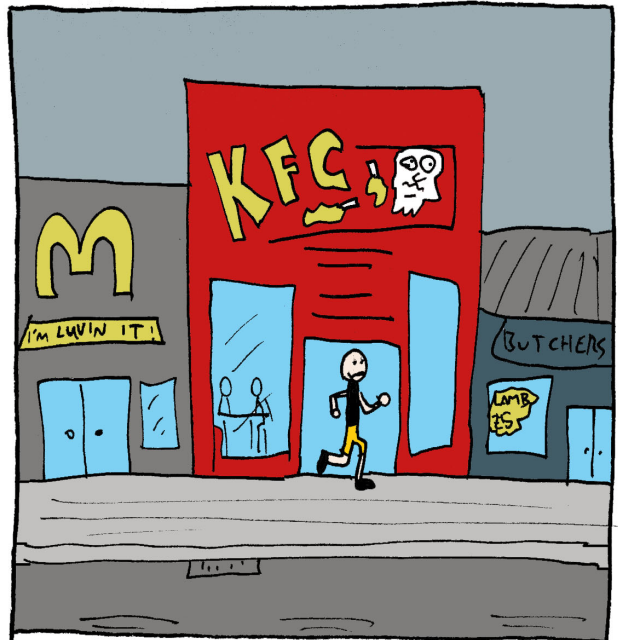
Having more or less completed the research, I've come to a couple of conclusions.



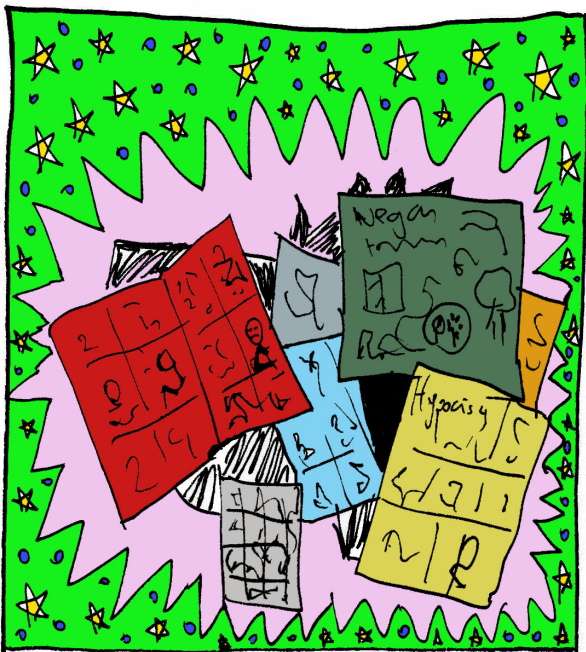
One is that vegan identity is often fluid. The people I spoke to negotiate their identities very carefully.



They take care over who they open up to about their veganism.



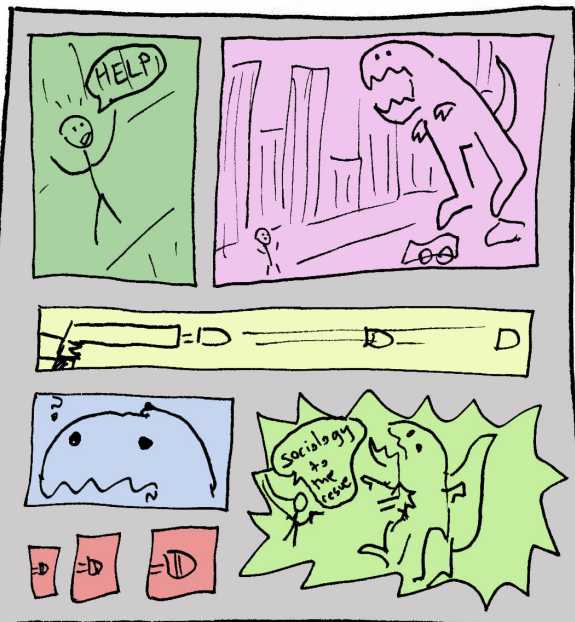
They're generally aware that it isn't seen as 'normal'. Dealing with that perceived 'abnormality' is an important aspect of their daily experience.



I also found that asking people to make comics was really interesting and rewarding.



The comics were fascinating, rich and diverse.



It suggests that there is definitely scope to further explore the potential of comics as a research tool.



and possibly even as a mode of representation!



