

"The Trees Got Their Own Ways to Hurt Us": Entangled Bodies and Fragile Flesh in M.R. Carey's *The Book of Koli* (2020)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2024.15.1.5201>



Abstract

There is a post-apocalyptic England teeming with violent plants, where one break in the clouds could wake the trees around you, condemning you to become sustenance for thirsty roots. This is the speculative future of M.R. Carey's young adult novel, *The Book of Koli*, where humans struggle to adapt to their new role and plants pose an ever-growing threat. The novel follows teen protagonist, Koli Woodsmith, as he is exiled from his village of Mythen Rood and left to journey through the deadly wilderness with the company of Monono Aware, a form of artificial intelligence inside a music player.

Together, they encounter vengeful villagers, religious cannibals, and flesh-hungry plants. In this article, I analyse how *The Book of Koli* engages with, what I term, "plant flesh," through the analogous transformations of humans and plants. Plant flesh is a development of Michael Marder's "grafts," where he suggests that grafts are an expression of proliferation for both plants and flesh. With grafts, Marder illustrates the vegetality of flesh; with plant flesh, I illustrate both the vegetality of flesh and the fleshiness of the vegetal. Plant flesh, then, becomes a term of indistinction (as per Matthew Calarco), where, through plant flesh, we can begin to trace the ways that humans and animals are *like plants*. In *The Book of Koli*'s young adult context, plant flesh's indistinction captures the shared and necessary – but oftentimes violent – transformation of flesh, as teen protagonist – Koli – transitions into adolescence alongside genetically modified plants and their evolution into speculative monstrosities. Through theoretical discussions and close readings, I argue that explorations of plant flesh in *The Book of Koli* serve to demonstrate both the shared, violent transformations of plant and human flesh and the indistinction that such transformations encourage between the adolescent Koli and the ever-evolving plants. *The Book of Koli*'s speculative young adult journey, then, with its botanical threats and adolescent transformations, makes apparent the indistinct zones that can emerge, when we tend to the entangled bodies and fragile flesh of both plants and humans.

Keywords: Plants, flesh, speculative fiction, indistinction.

Resumen

Hay una Inglaterra post-apocalíptica repleta de plantas violentas, donde una ruptura en las nubes podría despertar a los árboles a tu alrededor, condenándote a convertirte en sustento de raíces sedientas. Este es el futuro especulativo de la novela de literatura juvenil de M.R. Carey, *The Book of Koli*, en la que los humanos luchan por adaptarse a su nuevo rol y las plantas representan una amenaza cada vez mayor. La novela sigue al protagonista adolescente, Koli Woodsmith, cuando es exiliado del pueblo de Mythen Rood y abandonado para viajar a través del desierto mortal con la compañía de Monono Aware, una forma de inteligencia artificial dentro de un reproductor de música. Juntos, se

encuentran con aldeanos vengativos, caníbales religiosos y plantas hambrientas de carne. En este artículo, analizo cómo *The Book of Koli* se relaciona con lo que yo llamo "carne vegetal", a través de transformaciones análogas de humanos y plantas. La carne vegetal es un desarrollo de los "injertos" de Michael Marder, donde sugiere que los injertos son una expresión de proliferación tanto para las plantas como para la carne. Con injertos, Marder ilustra la vegetalidad de la carne; con la carne vegetal, ilustro tanto la vegetalidad de la carne como la carnosidad de lo vegetal. La carne vegetal, entonces, se convierte en un término de indistinción (según Mateo Calarco), donde, a través de la carne vegetal, podemos comenzar a rastrear las formas en que los humanos y los animales son como las plantas. En el contexto de un joven de *The Book of Koli*, la indistinción de la carne vegetal captura la transformación compartida y necesaria, pero a menudo violenta, de la carne, mientras el protagonista adolescente, Koli, pasa a la adolescencia junto con las plantas genéticamente modificadas y su evolución hacia monstruosidades especulativas. A través de discusiones teóricas y lecturas detalladas, sostengo que las exploraciones de la carne vegetal en *The Book of Koli* sirven para demostrar tanto las transformaciones violentas y compartidas de la carne vegetal y humana como la indistinción que tales transformaciones fomentan entre el Koli adolescente y las plantas en constante evolución. El viaje especulativo del *The Book of Koli* hacia la adultez, entonces, con sus amenazas botánicas y transformaciones adolescentes, hace evidentes las zonas confusas que pueden surgir cuando atendemos a los cuerpos enredados y la carne frágil tanto de las plantas como de los humanos.

Palabras clave: Plantas, carne, ficción especulativa, indistinción.

Things We Want to Eat Fight Back

From the cavernous hollows of the pitcher plant that trap and ingest passing prey, to the mucilage-covered tendrils of the sundew which capture and absorb sugar-hungry insects, carnivorous plants have evolved to utilise their floral capabilities to feast on the flesh of fauna. Their carnivorous capabilities are being explored by researchers—Ulrike Bauer, Kenji Fukushima, and Tanya Renner—to determine the possibility and viability of "conferring carnivorous plant-like traits by single-gene transfer" (Bristol Mechanical Ecology Lab), in order to make edible crops more resilient to insects, improve their nutrition, and reduce the reliance on pesticides in arable agriculture. Research into edible crop resiliency is crucial for the future of food security, since, as Chris Gilligan notes, "pests and diseases remain one of the biggest threats to food production, increasingly destabilising food security and livelihoods across climate-vulnerable regions around the world" (Goodyear). Bauer, Fukushima, and Renner suggest that the solution to these food security problems—the botanical techno-fix—can be harvested from the genes of carnivorous plants.

Insect-repellent surfaces and viscoelastic trapping fluids are among the carnivorous plant traits that the research team are interested in. If the wetness-activated surfaces of the pitcher plant were transferred to edible crops, they suggest, it would "give access to beneficial insects such as pollinators and predators during the day," but it would facilitate their dispersal, when it rains, ensuring that insects have less continuous access to edible crops (Bristol Mechanical Ecology Lab). While the team aim to use a "novel spray-on method for transient genetic transformation"

to eliminate "the risks and environmental concerns generally associated with transgenic plants" (Bristol Mechanical Ecology Lab), during their research, this—even temporary—alteration of plants' genes speaks to anxieties surrounding the future of plant capabilities and the consequences of manipulating plants for human aims. This botanical techno-fix, therefore, is haunted by the speculative possibilities of genetically modified, carnivorous plants.

M.R. Carey's speculative young adult novel, *The Book of Koli*, explores the possibilities of the botanical techno-fix. From choker seeds that take root inside living human flesh to waking trees that crush their victims between creaking limbs, Carey's speculative plants extrapolate the anxieties and consequences of creating genetically modified, carnivorous plants. Like the carnivorously altered crops of the research project, *The Book of Koli's* plants were genetically modified to improve their survival in an increasingly inhospitable environment. These plants cultivate a dystopian environment, where humans survive in isolated communities, perpetually fearful of the outside world. Lamenting about—what adolescent protagonist Koli refers to as—"the old times," he notes that "there was a time when there wasn't hardly no trees at all. They had all died" (Carey 16). Representative of a near-future Earth, the inhospitable landscape of "the old times" becomes a haunting prognostication of the world that could soon emerge, if we continue to degrade the environment and disregard plant life. Like Bauer, Fukushima, and Renner's research, the scientists of "the old times" aim to tackle these ecological problems, through a botanical techno-fix, making plants more resilient and improving their access to nutrition.¹ Koli recalls that the scientists used "genetic triggers" that "made the trees that was there already change their habits. Made them grow faster, for one thing. And made them take their nourishment in different ways, so they could live even in places where the soil was thin, which by that time was most places" (Carey 16).

The genetically modified plants of "the old times" take on a new vitality in arid landscapes, technologically adapting to these new conditions; they speak to Tessa Laird's claim that "we figure the loss of plants as the end of all hope, and the miraculous growth of plants in hostile environs as hope's beginning" (63). As fast-growing, thirsty plants repopulate the Earth, they appear to offer a tendril of hope. However, the scientists' genetically modified trees do not remain as "hope's beginning" or a promise of futurity; instead, these carnivorous trees speak to T. S. Miller's suggestion that "the monster plant may point to a deep unease about the boundary between taxonomic kingdoms" (461), signalling a disruption of the hierarchical fixity of human-plant relationships.

The trees' genetically modified growing speeds and alternative nourishment sources enter predatory territories, with limbs reaching for flesh instead of sunlight

¹ As well as the botanical techno-fix, the novel also details other forms of futuristic technology, such as weaponry, entertainment consoles, computers, and artificial intelligence. Like the initial aims of the botanical techno-fix, the remnants of these other forms of technology are regarded as beneficial for their human users, even if they often struggle to understand how to use them successfully. As with the botanical techno-fix, these other forms of technology grant power to their user—whether human or plant—increasing their protection and agency in the novel's inhospitable landscape.

and roots drinking blood instead of water. What began as an attempt to create more resilient plants evolved—in accordance with anxieties surrounding the future of plant capabilities and the consequences of manipulating plants for human aims—into a monstrous rendering of genetically modified plant life. Like their speculative predecessors—John Wyndam’s *Triffids* and *Little Shop of Horrors’* Audrey II—Carey’s genetically modified, flesh-hungry forests turn upon their human co-habitants, taking sustenance from their flesh and disrupting the hierarchical fixity of human-plant relationships. As Koli notes,

When the trees first took it on themselves to move, they wasn’t hunting. They was just reaching for the sun, which was the most of their meat and drink. But as soon as they moved, creatures of all kinds got trapped between them and crushed. And the trees liked the taste of the dead beasts and the dead men and women. They relished the nourishment them dead things brung with them. There was already plants and flowers a-plenty that had that craving, sundews and flytrappers and such. Now the trees got it too. And being changed so much already, by the hand of human kind, they took it on their own selves to change some more. They got better at knowing where the beasts was. Better at trapping them, and killing them, and feeding on what was left. (Carey 16-17)

As if pertaining to the research into plant carnivory, Koli recalls the carnivorous plants—the sundews and flytrappers—of “the old times” that are already adapted to actively trap and consume flesh, alongside a reiteration of plant life being transformed by human hands. With innocuous intentions, the trees utilise the “genetic triggers” that the scientists activated, becoming the resilient flora they intended. However, they soon continue down this evolutionary trail, extrapolating the movements and nutritional capabilities of the scientists’ modifications. As they push the scientists’ utopian vision into a dystopian reality, *The Book of Koli’s* plants become fantastical renderings of the monster plant, transforming scientific innovation into evolutionary nightmare. In the end, they become more resilient, predatory, and better able to survive than even the scientists could have imagined, even if their survival is predicated on hunting flesh for food.

The Book of Koli begins to trouble our reliance on and support of botanical techno-fixes, extrapolating our anxieties about genetically modifying plants and altering their capabilities, through speculative strategies that infuse the wetness-activated surfaces of edible crops with the deadly trappings of the novel’s trees. The spectre of the carnivorously transformed edible crop haunts the novel’s floral characters; as Koli states, “things we want to eat fight back” (Carey 13).

Grafts and Plant Flesh

As carnivorous genes transform edible crops and speculative trees, they speak to and realise the anxieties surrounding the future of plant capabilities and the consequences of manipulating plants for human aims. Through the “single-gene transfer” of the research project, parts of one plant are infused into another, and, through the “genetic triggers” of *The Book of Koli’s* fictional scientists, plants are

transformed from within. In these genetic modifications, plants transform one another's materiality (instigated by the pressure of human interference). Exemplifying a transformative vegetality, these genetic modifications engage with Michael Marder's theorisation of "grafts."

Plant grafting involves inserting a graft—the shoots or twigs of a plant—into the slit of a tree. As their sap bleeds into one another and the plants co-exist with or take on the qualities of the other, "the host is no longer the same as it was before" (Marder, *Grafts* 15). For Marder, grafting—often, violently—exposes a transformative vegetality: "grafting, therefore, foregrounds the plasticity and receptivity of vegetal life, its constitutive capacity for symbiosis and metamorphosis, its openness to the other at the expense of fixed identities (even the identity ensconced in genetics) revealed, by their very vitality, as illusory" (Marder, *Grafts* 15). Grafts, then, violently expose the transformative ability and fluid identity of plant life, whereby plants can become part of one another, fused and growing together as modified tendrils. Building on the grafting of plants, Marder opens up the multi-species entanglement of grafts, noting that

grafts are not circumscribed to plants. They can also name a surgical procedure, whereby living tissue, most often skin, is transplanted from one part of the body to another, or from one body to another. When they are successful, that is to say, when the organism does not reject the tissues grafted onto it, these operations disclose the vegetal character of corporeality: of flesh proliferating on flesh. (Marder, *Grafts* 15)

Through surgical grafts, therefore, Marder seeks to capture the ways flesh engages with vegetal modes of existence; there are moments of transplantation and propagation, endless growth and proliferation, porosity, infinite wholeness, and fluid identity. In other words, human flesh expresses the transformative vegetality of flesh. As Marder continues, "the very fact that grafts can refer to animal or human tissues as well as to plant parts testifies to the word's and the practice's quiet rebellion against the strictures of identity" (Marder, *Grafts* 15). When viewed through Marder's "graft" rubric, then, these genetically modified plants offer us an opportunity to explore the vegetal fleshiness of plants.

Developing Marder's theorisation of "grafts," I propose the term "plant flesh," in order to further articulate the multi-species entanglements of grafting, whereby plant flesh captures both the vegetality of flesh *and* the fleshiness of the vegetal. Plant flesh creates a theoretical graft, fusing the vegetality of flesh of Marder's grafts with the indistinct fleshiness of Matthew Calarco's indistinction approach; theoretical sap bleeds into one another to cultivate plant flesh. In Calarco's indistinction approach, he proposes flesh—and its inherent edibility—as a facilitator for human and animal indistinction (57). Through this shared fleshy edibility, Calarco suggests, we arrive at an alternative ethical possibility—indistinction—which no longer maintains distinct ontological and ethical boundaries between humans and animals; indistinction requires speculating on what we all—humans and animals—might become, when we embrace our shared, fleshy edibility. As Calarco states, "to acknowledge oneself as inhabiting a shared zone of exposed embodiment with animals is to recognize that we

are in deep and fundamental ways *like animals*" (58). Developing Calarco's position to more explicitly account for plant life, plant flesh encourages us, as humans, to recognise that we are in deep and fundamental ways *like plants*, too.² Dawn Keetley comments on this relationship between plants and humans, noting that plants "are the utterly and ineffably strange, embodying an *absolute alterity*" (9), yet "there sometimes glimmers into view the unsettling sense that maybe we are also *like plants*" (16). As humans begin to acknowledge how they are *like plants*, plant flesh exposes the indistinctions between humans and plants, while being aware of plants' unique capabilities—for example, their ability to die in parts and live in others (Marder, "Resist Like a Plant" 30) and their indistinct sense of "inside" and "outside" (Marder, "The Life of Plants" 263). Plant flesh, then, entails rethinking our relationship *to* plants and our relationship *with* plants, where we become open to the speculative ethical possibilities that arise from this rethinking, in order to see how we are *like plants*.

As such, plant flesh, as argued in this article, develops Marder's theorisation of grafts and Calarco's indistinction approach, expands the field of critical plant studies, and enhances the analysis of plant life in *The Book of Koli*. While Monica Gagliano et al. argue that "the predominant literary discourse on plants renders their lives symbolic or figurative, as organic referents for animal meaning" (xi), plant flesh allows us to engage in, what they term, a "phytogenic—or, preferably, biogenic—form of literary criticism," which "would seriously regard the lives of plants in relation to humankind in terms that would look beyond the purely symbolic or "correlative" dimensions of the vegetal" (xi). As such, through plant flesh, we can acknowledge the plant with(in) us, begin to consider what it means to be plant flesh, and speculate about ethical forms of *being with* plants.

Exploring plant flesh in *The Book of Koli*, I argue that plant flesh demonstrates both the shared, violent transformations of plant and human flesh and the indistinction that such transformations encourage between the adolescent Koli and the ever-evolving plants. As I explore depictions of plant flesh in the novel, the carnivorous trees move from explicitly monstrous to implicitly indistinct, where moments of disturbing consumption and instrumentalisation are reframed as sites of ethical reconfiguration. *The Book of Koli's* speculative young adult journey, then, with its botanical threats and adolescent transformations, makes apparent the indistinct zones that can emerge, when we tend to the entangled bodies and fragile flesh of both plants and humans.

² Aristotle explored the idea of being *like plants*, through the vegetative soul as the foundation of plant, animal, and human life. However, as Matthew Hall argues, through the vegetative soul, "Aristotle constructed a hierarchy of life with plants placed firmly at the bottom" (7). Plant flesh, on the other hand, aims to deconstruct these anthropocentric hierarchies, while cultivating a shared ontological state, through indistinction.

Plants in Young Adult Literature

Speculative young adult literature, like *The Book of Koli*, is a particularly fruitful medium for exploring the indistinction of plant flesh, since, as Lykke Guanio-Uluru and Melanie Duckworth note, "Children's and YA literature emerge as spaces of encounter with the vegetal world—spaces of engagement and transformation" (12), where "the notion of kinship with plants has long been approached" (3). These speculative YA texts, therefore, create environments, where human and plant flesh constantly encounter, engage, and transform one another, challenging the ontological and ethical fixity of hierarchical human-plant relationships. Speaking to nonhuman relationships more broadly, Zoe Jaques suggests that "children's literature can offer sophisticated interventions into debates about what it means to be human or non-human and offer ethical imaginings of a posthuman world" (5). Therefore, with explorations of plant flesh fuelled by the speculative ethical imaginings of indistinction, YA literature's transformative narratives cultivate environments that offer alternative ethical and ontological possibilities. Building on this relationship between YA literature and emerging scholarship in critical plant studies—such as plant flesh—Lydia Kokkola argues that the increasing inclusion of human-plant relations "suggests that the thinking that underlies critical plant studies is being made accessible to young readers" (277). In other words, these YA texts are actively engaging in speculative ethical thinking about plants.

With increasing popularity from scholars and readers alike, *The Book of Koli* joins an ever-growing body of speculative YA literature interested in plant-human relationships and transformations, where texts, as Monika Rusvai suggests, are "rife with putting the non-human into focus" (88). Despite the increasing popularity of botanical characters, Rusvai comments that "the more formulaic texts in the genre hardly ever aim to challenge anthropocentric thinking through focusing on the non-human other" (88). However, Rusvai highlights Naomi Novik's *Uprooted* (2016) as a "notable exception" to this claim (89); a novel which, like *The Book of Koli*, "problematizes the vegetal other" (89). With trees that capture and consume villagers, both Novik's *Uprooted* and Carey's *The Book of Koli* seem to share an interest in the violent and complex representations of human-plant relationships and transformations. However, unlike the arboreal characters of *Uprooted*, *The Book of Koli*'s plants do not animate or challenge the ontological and ethical fixity of human-plant relationships through anthropomorphism. Instead, the plants extrapolate the capabilities of carnivorous plants, through the fictional scientific intervention of the botanical techno-fix, bringing the indistinction of human and plant flesh into focus, through shared, violent transformations.

The Trees Got Their Own Ways to Hurt Us

Through their materiality, Susan McHugh notes that "plants appear in the pages of virtually every literary text" (para 1)—either physically as paper;

symbolically, through the recollection of paper in technology; or textually as characters and environments. As you thumb through the pages of *The Book of Koli*, you encounter plant flesh in both its speculative narrative and in its papery materiality. Fictional human flesh is crushed by waking plant flesh, while plant flesh is crushed between human flesh fingertips. Fern tendrils—like the titular tendrils of this special issue—curl around the paperback's spine, waiting to feel the transformative sensation of human flesh.

These transformative qualities of *The Book of Koli's* flesh-hungry forests confirm McHugh's suggestion that "forests have long served as transformative zones in literary traditions of cultures rooted in arboreal regions of the world" (para 33). As they trap and feast on fauna, the carnivorous, genetically modified trees push these transformative zones into violent territories, while also encouraging moments of imaginative experimentation. Since, as Koli states, "the forest wasn't a place that liked us much at all, except as meat" (Carey 208), the children work through these dangers using imaginative play, transforming violent realities into playful speculations. In the game "Forest Wake," the children "pretended the house was a wilderness we was exploring, or we played forest-wake, where all the chairs and tables was trees and if we touched them they would wake and whelm us" (Carey 23). Tip-toeing around wooden chairs and avoiding the legs of tables, cured wood is reanimated by the children, taking on a previously denied liveliness that reinscribes the wood with both a renewed danger and a reinforced passivity. Even as the children feign terror, they—and we—know that this wood cannot feast on their flesh.

Unfortunately for Koli, "Forest Wake" does not remain a childish game; instead, it becomes a daunting reality. After Koli is exiled from his village of Mythen Rood—he, like the plants, is seen as a newly powerful threat to the villagers and their way of life—he is forced to navigate the forest. As playful speculation becomes violent reality, once again, Koli plays "Forest Wake," but, this time, the threat of being whelmed is real. Koli comments that

The trees loomed right in front of me there, stretching up into the sky, shouldering each other aside, or so it seemed, to get a look at me. That was only my fear, though, and not a real thing I was seeing. The trees was sleeping the dull day away and give no sign they even knowed I was there. Don't be such a coward, Koli, I says to myself. Think of them men and women of the before times, that had such knowing of trees they could tell them what to do and when to do it. Imagine you're one of them men of old, and be brave. Imagine the trees bowing down in front of you, like you're their king. (Carey 208-209)

Paranoid, rather than comforted, Koli's childish imaginings transform into taunting anxieties; in this game, his flesh is at stake. Like the wooden furniture, Koli reanimates the dormant trees, picturing them waking and whelming him, as they compete for a chunk of his flesh. Without the safety of Mythen Rood's walls or the playful speculations, Koli is at the mercy of the trees, as well as his imagination. Despite his paranoid imaginings, Koli does, once again, return to the playful speculations of "Forest Wake" to comfort his fear: he imagines himself as the people of "the old times."

Instead of competing for his flesh and clutching him between their limbs, the trees' movements become a vision of antiquated submission—they bow down to the boy of the old times, who has the power to tell them what to do and when.

As they loom in children's nightmares and imaginations, with vicious tendrils and craving roots, *The Book of Koli's* trees are not so easily instrumentalised, posing a mortal threat to those who get caught in their limbs. However, these deadly consequences do not bring an end to the instrumentalisation of plants; instead, humans reconfigure their approach, ensuring that harvesting plant flesh does not result in the loss of human flesh. In the village of Mythen Rood—Koli's home village—villagers are trained as "catchers," hunting trees under the cover of clouds, while they are less able to defend themselves. When they set out on a hunt for chunks of plant flesh, the humans catchers are also on the hunt for revenge against these powerful trees, performing the vestiges of human dominion, through devious lacerations. Trained as a "woodsmith," Koli partakes in these hunts, able to "catch wood from a live tree without getting myself killed, how to dry it out and then steep it in the poisonous soup called stop-mix until it was safe, and how to turn and trim it" (Carey 4). As a woodsmith, Koli is already bound, by name and profession, to plant flesh, in charge of violently transforming it from lively flesh to stiff, deadened flesh, with the help of the chemical stop-mix. Previously animate and autonomous plant flesh is rendered into useable pieces of wood:

The fresh-cut wood was stacked in the yard outside the house so it could dry, and the stacks was so high they shut out the sun at noon-day. We wasn't allowed to go near the piles of fresh wood, or the wood that was steeping in the killing shed: the first could strike you down and the second could poison you. Rampart law said you couldn't build nothing out of wood unless the planks had steeped in stop-mix for a month and was dead for sure. Last thing you wanted was for the wall of your house to wake up and get to being alive again, which green wood always will. (Carey 5)

Following their capture, a new form of butchery awaits the fresh-cut wood: a slow, forced feast of poison. In the killing shed, their flesh is reinscribed with the distinctions and instrumentalisations that thrived in "the old times"; each cut and chemical soak becomes a marker of humans' (regained) control. However, even as the trees are stripped of their flesh and deadly capabilities, they threaten to reanimate, forming a forest of skinned trees within the walls of Mythen Rood; they are able to die in parts and live in others. Furthermore, in the killing shed, as human, plant, and chemical combine, the butchering and curing processes expose the shared, violent transformations of both human and plant flesh. While Koli shares the dangers of getting too close to either the fresh or steeping wood, the indistinctions between human and plant flesh emerge: 1) in the same way that the planks of fresh-cut wood—and, indeed, the trees in the forest—threaten to "strike you down" for sustenance, the catchers actively strike down limbs of the dormant trees for raw material, transforming living flesh into consumable flesh; and 2) likewise, the stop-mix, which renders the wood into useable material, also threatens to poison human flesh, too, transforming both plant and human flesh through infection. The killing shed,

therefore, purported as a marker of human control, ontological and ethical distinction, and plant flesh butchery, is exposed as a site of indistinction, where plant and human flesh become indistinct, through the shared, violent transformations of fresh-cuts and poisoning.

The killing shed is not the only place, where plants are butchered and fed a poisoned diet of stop-mix; out in the forest, humans poison the soil, exploiting the trees' genetically enhanced resilience and diversified nutrient intake. As Koli recalls,

I seen that the trees was dead, though they still stood as high as ever. Their trunks was hollowed out partly, and they didn't have no leaves on their branches, while all the other trees still had a few reds and yellows left to fall. I marvelled at this. What could kill a tree? (Carey 262)

Despite his experience killing and steeping fresh-cut wood as a woodsmith, Koli is in disbelief at the sight of dead and dying trees. While the catchers are only able to capture branches—chunks of plant flesh—the humans who poisoned the soil have slaughtered entire trees. To ensure their effectiveness, this poison, like the stop-mix, infects the trees, before hollowing out their flesh from within; only their bark—their skin—remains. From leaves to trunk, each marker of liveliness has been stripped, with their structure remaining as a signifier of the powerful trees that once lived. In the same way that catchers butcher trees to seek revenge for the trees butchering humans, the trees appear to be hollowed out with poison to seek revenge for the germination practices of one of the novel's most infamous inhabitants: the choker trees.

During a choker spring, which happens every four to five years, the choker trees disperse their seeds, breaching the borders of Mythen Rood and lodging themselves indistinctly inside soil and flesh. With their accelerated growth and seed dispersal, the choker trees epitomise the resilience that the scientists of "the old times" sought to achieve through genetic triggers:

choker trees growed fast and tall, and they growed in any ground. The onliest way to keep them back was to uproot or burn out every seed that fell. If a seed landed in the ground, and no one seen it, it would be three feet high by lock-tide and taller than a man come morning. (Carey 16)

Even as saplings, the choker trees capture the ferocity of the genetically modified, carnivorous trees, planting fear inside the walls of Mythen Rood; their dispersal reinforces the idea that the settlement of Mythen Rood—and the human flesh it contains—is always conditional, always on the edge of being whelmed by flesh-hungry trees. However, this ferocity and power is accompanied by a vulnerability, as choker saplings are plucked from the soil by fearful, angry villagers. Like the choker seeds, Koli, too, is plucked from Mythen Rood as an adolescent—a sapling—by fearful, angry villagers, after he "wakes" a piece of technology and threatens to expose the corruption of Mythen Rood's leaders. He, like the choker seeds, quickly plants his idea in the foundations of the village; the (supposed) danger he poses must be "uprooted

or burnt out." The villagers do not want to encounter these choker trees—or Koli—in fully-grown form.

Marder comments on the inherent vulnerability of plants, stating that "proliferating from pure loss, plants offer themselves with unconditional generosity. Silently, they extend themselves in space, exposing their vegetal bodies in utter vulnerability to being chopped off or plucked, harvested or trimmed" ("Vegetal Anti-Metaphysics" 479). Therefore, as choker seeds germinate inside the walls of Mythen Rood, they expose their plant flesh vulnerability; as Koli walks in the forest outside the walls of Mythen Rood, he, too, exposes his human flesh vulnerability—each is vulnerable in the clutches of the other. Rather than viewing this shared vulnerability as a cause for continuous retaliation, the novel opens up these spaces of indistinction, which offer alternative ways of understanding *being with* plants. The novel's development of indistinction is bound to adolescence, to the continued growth and vulnerability captured by both Koli and the plants. Once again, through these moments of shared, violent transformation, there lingers the speculative possibility of more ethical relationships between humans and plants.

Developing these moments of shared, violent transformations, the choker seeds do not only germinate within human villages; instead, they germinate within human flesh. As Koli laments,

of all our mortal threats, I was most mightily afraid of the choker seeds, because they attacked so fast and was so hard to fight. If a seed fell on your skin, you had only got a few seconds to dig it out again before the roots went in too deep. After that there wasn't nothing anyone could do for you save to kill you right away before the seedling hollowed you out. (Carey 14)

In the same way as their rooting in the soil, the choker seeds quickly bury themselves inside human flesh, taking root in the iron-rich tissue. As they hollow out humans and take root within their bones, they speak to the ways that "plant growth always breaks what seeks to contain it, transgressing borders meant to confine and define" (Keetley 13). The once distinct borders—both physical and ontological—between choker sapling and human villager, between plant flesh and human flesh, are transgressed by choker roots, becoming porous and permeable. During this transgression of borders, plant flesh and human flesh engage in a modified version of the grafting process, layers of flesh violently transformed by one another. In this modified graft, rather than plant fleshes being grafted onto one another or human fleshes being grafted onto one another, during the choker seed germination, plant flesh is grafted onto human flesh, so that "the host is no longer the same as it was before" (Marder, *Grafts* 15). In other words, this graft produces the indistinction growing within plant flesh.

Like the choker seed germination, grafts are predicated on a shared, violent transformation and exposed vulnerability between the grafted fleshes. As Marder comments,

Membranes, tissues, liquids, and surfaces must be exposed to one another in all their nudity for a graft to work, to exercise its transformative influence. But this exposure is, itself, something exceptionally difficult to achieve and to sustain, which is why it

calls for procedures that appear to be violent. Only at the price of a prior, semi-forgotten violence can the sense of seamlessness and continuity be maintained. (*Grafts* 17)

Despite their fleshy exposure, Marder emphasises the necessity of an *apparent* violence for a successful graft; flesh cannot seamlessly graft without a shared, violent transformation, but this violence must be contained to the past for the graft to be sustained. Therefore, as plant flesh violently ruptures human flesh, in the choker seed germination, the violence takes on a new meaning, one of speculative indistinction. However, the villagers do not uphold the semi-forgotten violence of the graft, halting the process and plucking the choker sapling from its hollowed out host. Despite the physical failure of the graft, the choker seed and human graft *does* succeed in highlighting the indistinction between plant flesh and human flesh; through the shared, violent transformation and exposed vulnerability, both the seed and the villager will no longer be the same as they were before, endlessly changed and connected by this germinated graft.

Alongside this modified grafting process, the choker seed germination also speaks, once again, to the extrapolated behaviours of current plants achieved by the scientists of "the old times": they utilise animals as seed carriers. Known as epizoochory, plant seeds attach themselves, most frequently to "furry terrestrial mammals," using "spines, hooks, claws, bristles, barbs, grapples, and prickles," which cling "tenaciously to their carriers" (Britannica para 7). Some seeds even "lodge themselves between the hooves of large grazing mammals" (Britannica para 8). As choker seeds hook and bury themselves into human flesh, they partake—more explicitly violently—in epizoochory, utilising animals as seed carriers. After demonstrating the choker trees' effective epizoochory, the novel makes a surprising revelation about an animal that escapes—continuously—from the rooting of the saplings: rats. Now as large as domesticated dogs, the rats eke out an existence in the forests, rarely making their way into Mythen Rood. While out hunting, the catchers often notice that the rats seem to pass by the trees unnoticed and their skin is left unbroken by choker seeds. After asking the Rampart's database (a piece of technology like an electronic encyclopaedia), the villagers learn that, as well as poisons, there are other secretions that protect faunal flesh from the seeds of the choker trees. The rats, for example, "had got something inside them that sweated out onto their skin when the sun come out and kind of stopped the choker trees from closing tight on them, or choker seeds from breaking open on them and growing down into their bodies" (Carey 15). The rats and the choker seeds, therefore, engage in a traditional form of epizoochory, with the seeds hooking onto the fur of the rats without burrowing down into their flesh; instead, they will be carried and dispersed further around the forest.

As secretions protect exposed and vulnerable faunal flesh, the humans of Mythen Rood are perturbed by the rats' evolutionary advantage, devising a plan to steal their sweat-covered flesh for themselves:

there was a plan put together and voted on to make cloaks out of dead rats' skins so hunters could go into the forest even on sunny days. It got so far as Molo Tanhide

making one of these cloaks with skins some hunters took after a fight. But he refused flat-out to put it on and try it. (Carey 17)

Unable to manufacture the rats' sweat, the villagers slaughter, butcher, and skin the rats for their raw material—their skin—like they do with the fresh-cut wood in the killing shed. Made from hundreds of rats, these sweat-covered skins transform the human hunters' access to both plant flesh and animal flesh; with their skinned cloaks, they hide under hides, transformed into even more violent hunters, in both action and appearance. Disturbed by his creation, even Molo Tanhide, Mythen Rood's tanner, will not wear the skinned cloak, afraid of who he might become. Through the violent transformations of animal flesh and application of human flesh, once again, a moment of violent exposure operates as a modification of the grafting process. This time, sweat replaces sap and flesh hides flesh, rather than hollowing it out. However, unlike with the choker seeds, it is not immediately apparent what violent transformations await the humans; the rats seek their revenge through teeth and claw:

For a while after that we had trouble with the rats. They knowed we killed some of theirs, and would attack our hunters in the woods every time they seen them. Nobody died, that I remember, but men and women would come back with rat bites on their arms or shoulders, or their legs gashed with rat claws. It got so fresh meat was scarce for a year or more. (Carey 18)

Like the humans who refuse to forget the violent transformations of the choker seed grafts, the rats refuse to forget the violent transformations of the humans' rat skin grafts, inflicting wounds on the humans' flesh as a re-inscription of the butchery they performed on the rats. The rats, rather than transforming the humans into even more violent hunters, through their skinned flesh, transform the humans into impotent hunters, instead, preventing them from capturing fresh meat or fresh-cut wood. The price to pay for skinning and butchering the rats is flesh.

The rats confirm the shared, violent transformation necessary for both grafts and indistinction—if the humans will not willingly transform their flesh, the rats will perform it for them. Therefore, as these modified, multi-species grafts—human, animal, and plant—are performed, they expose both the vegetality of flesh *and* the fleshiness of the vegetal, inherent in the concept of plant flesh. In doing so, they reaffirm, once more, the ontological and ethical indistinctions made possible through explorations of plant flesh. Through moments of shared, violent transformations and exposed vulnerability, we begin to explore the speculative indistinctions between humans, plants, and animals.

Like Plants

The Book of Koli cultivates carnivorous, genetically modified plants that challenge our thinking about the instrumentalisation of plants and botanical techno-fixes (like those of the carnivorous single-gene transfer). Throughout the novel, the characters—human, plant, and animal—are haunted by the speculative possibilities

of genetically modified, carnivorous plants *and* plants' current capabilities; every genetically modified behaviour is an extrapolated version of current plant capabilities. With their speculatively amplified awareness and hunting prowess, Carey's captivating plants support Katherine Bishop's claim that "this profusion of plants in popular culture, especially in sf, suggests at least an uneasy acknowledgment that plants have capabilities that we humans neither share nor yet fully comprehend" (2). As plant capabilities enter the botanical territories of *The Book of Koli*, my analysis demonstrates that Carey's plants also invite reflection on plants' current capabilities, as well as their capabilities post-genetic modification. Furthermore, these extrapolated capabilities also open up space for exploring the concept of plant flesh and the speculative ontological and ethical indistinctions that the term encourages.

While the characters in *The Book of Koli* often try to turn away from the plant-human indistinction that shared, violent transformations cultivate, it is not so easy for us, as readers, with plant flesh crushed between our fingertips, to ignore these indistinctions and the speculative ethical thinking that accompanies it. With its vulnerable saplings, butchered skins, and modified, multi-species grafts, the novel sows the seeds for less violent interactions between humans and plants, encouraging us to witness plant instrumentalisation differently and reconsider the ontological and ethical distinctions between plants and humans. As such, the novel actively opens up a zone of indistinction, where we can begin to acknowledge the plant flesh within us and speculate about ethical forms of *being with* plants, while appreciating their—speculatively extrapolated—capabilities. Therefore, through explorations of plant flesh, my analysis of the novel generates the speculative ethical thinking necessary for thinking about a future where "the tress got their own ways to hurt us" and where "the things we want to eat fight back" (Carey 13), by encouraging us to see how we are *like plants*.

Submission received 15 July 2023

Revised version accepted 14 January 2024

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