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**Speculative Flesh Ecologies:**

**The Indistinction of Flesh in 21st century Speculative Fiction**

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# **Abstract**

Imagine a world where humans eat humans, plants eat people, pigs eat garbage, and meat is machine-grown; these are some of the fleshy interactions imagined by speculative fiction writers. These fleshy interactions ask us what it means to consider ourselves—humans, animals, plants, things, and cultured beings—as flesh and what kinds of ontological and ethical possibilities emerge when we reconsider what it means to both be and eat flesh.

These ontological and ethical possibilities of flesh, I suggest, operate within speculative flesh ecologies; a space for humans to explore and rethink the distinctions drawn between themselves and other nonhumans. The speculative flesh ecologies presented in twenty-first century speculative fiction engage with contemporary issues such as animal agriculture, deforestation, waste pollution, and “techno-fixes,” in order to explore new ways of living with one another in times of heightened ecological uncertainty. Might the solution to the ongoing threats to our species ecologies come from embracing the position of indistinction between humans and nonhumans?

Building on Matthew Calarco’s indistinction approach, I bring together other theoretical perspectives—Michael Marder’s grafts, Jane Bennett’s vital materialism, and Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra—in order to push indistinction into new directions. When used as a framework to explore speculative fiction, this theoretical archive creates a cohesive argument for the expansive ontological and ethical possibilities of speculative flesh ecologies. I will argue that the speculative flesh ecologies I explore in twenty-first century speculative fiction encourage us to adopt an indistinct approach to multi-species communities.

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# **Declaration**

I, the author, confirm that this thesis is my own work. I am aware of the university’s guidance on the use of unfair means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

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**Table of Contents**

[**Abstract** 2](#_Toc137214902)

[**Acknowledgements** 3](#_Toc137214903)

[**Declaration** 5](#_Toc137214904)

[Introduction 8](#_Toc137214905)

[**An Edible Creature** 8](#_Toc137214906)

[**Speculative Flesh Ecologies** 13](#_Toc137214907)

[**Fleshing out the Field: Speculative/Flesh/Ecologies** 17](#_Toc137214908)

[**Fictional Slipperiness** 26](#_Toc137214909)

[**A Life with Cibi** 34](#_Toc137214910)

[“We Wouldn’t Ever Eat Anybody, Would We?”: Human/Animal Flesh and Indistinction in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Joseph D’Lacey’s *Meat* (2008) 35](#_Toc137214911)

[**Welcome to the Open Slaughterhouse** 35](#_Toc137214912)

[**Indistinction** 41](#_Toc137214913)

[**Red and Salty Meat Inside** 46](#_Toc137214914)

[**The Dog Could Catch Something to Eat** 57](#_Toc137214915)

[**I Am Meat** 68](#_Toc137214916)

[**We’ve Made Meat for Everyone!** 74](#_Toc137214917)

[**To Survive Without Causing Harm to Any Other Living Thing** 80](#_Toc137214918)

[**We Have Seen the Land Where Pain is Not Even a Memory** 87](#_Toc137214919)

[“I Gave Them Fruit”: Plant Flesh and Grafts in Sue Burke’s *Semiosis* (2018) 89](#_Toc137214920)

[**Our Green Planet** 89](#_Toc137214921)

[**Grafts** 95](#_Toc137214922)

[**A Niche in this Ecology for Ourselves** 102](#_Toc137214923)

[**To Tap Flesh for Food and Blood for Water** 105](#_Toc137214924)

[**I Gave Them Fruit** 116](#_Toc137214925)

[***Our* Green Planet** 123](#_Toc137214926)

[“The Pigs Ate Every*thing*”: Thing Flesh and Vital Materialism in Johanna Stoberock’s *Pigs* (2019) and Wu Ming-Yi’s *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011) 126](#_Toc137214927)

[**Plastic Islands** 126](#_Toc137214928)

[**Vibrant Matter** 131](#_Toc137214929)

[**Becoming Part of the Island** 139](#_Toc137214930)

[**She Felt Like She was Eating the World** 152](#_Toc137214931)

[**The Pigs Ate Every*thing*** 163](#_Toc137214932)

[**Five Pigs Roamed Freely** 179](#_Toc137214933)

[“Actual Real Proper Meat”: Cultured Flesh and Simulacra in Mat Blackwell’s *Beef* (2016) and Vina Jie-Min Prasad’s ‘A Series of Steaks’ (2017) 182](#_Toc137214934)

[**The Future of Meat is Here** 182](#_Toc137214935)

[**Simulacra, Simulation, and Hyperreality** 189](#_Toc137214936)

[**Proper Meat** 199](#_Toc137214937)

[**Fake Beef** 207](#_Toc137214938)

[**Corpse Meat** 215](#_Toc137214939)

[**Purebred Hereford** 221](#_Toc137214940)

[**IT’S ALIVE** 226](#_Toc137214941)

[**A Happy Cow** 232](#_Toc137214942)

[**Corpse-Eating Guilt** 237](#_Toc137214943)

[Conclusion 240](#_Toc137214944)

[**Resurrected Meatballs** 240](#_Toc137214945)

[**The Future of Speculative Flesh Ecologies** 244](#_Toc137214946)

[**Bibliography** 249](#_Toc137214947)

# Introduction

## **An Edible Creature**

There is a speculative multispecies city filled with edible creatures, whose flesh is sliced for consumption while they are still alive. Pieces of their flesh peel away as paste, transforming into versatile and pliable portions of food for their hungry consumers. In this city, it is perfectly natural to wave at these edible creatures and encourage them to relinquish their flesh, which they do seemingly without protest. Often, these edible creatures will sense your hunger, and a figure will emerge in the distance, “bouncing towards me. Its rabbit ears bob up and down as it hops forward. Even from far, you can tell it’s an edible creature. No one refers to it by its multisyllabic, scientific name, however. We call it “Cibus”—food in Latin.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This is the speculative future of Natsumi Tanaka’s short story, ‘A Life with Cibi,’ where the affable Cibi—small edible creatures engineered by humans—wander the city readying themselves for consumption, seemingly eager to become “the perfect food”[[2]](#footnote-2) for their human creators. Cibi, with a “human form” and “rabbit ears,” are grown as “an artificial crop” in a field, develop “a backpack with a knife inside” on their backs, and are described as a “self-sufficient organism” that can turn into a “chunk of paste” on command. With an array of ambiguous identifiers, Cibi inhabit multiple ontological identities; they are, all at once, humans, animals, plants, things, and cultured beings. Unifying these seemingly disparate ontological identities—the uncanny human form, the lively rabbit ears, the growing vegetal, the enmeshed butchering instrument, and the inert yet autonomous paste—is flesh.

As fleshy Cibi hop through the pages of Tanaka’s speculative story, their ontological and ethical ambiguity engages with my thesis’ focus on flesh. Flesh itself is inherently ontologically ambiguous, since, as Mayra Rivera notes, “the fabric of flesh is not simply human. Air, water, and soil nourish my flesh and constitute it accordingly, imperceptibly, without my knowledge or consent.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Materially, then, flesh is a combination of seemingly disparate ontological identities, with each participating in moments of exchange to feed the other. This materiality is, as Rivera notes, a “slippery materiality,” whereby “its propensity to change distinguishes “flesh” from “body.” [. . .] flesh is conceived as formless and impermanent, crossing the boundaries between the individual body and the world.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Flesh’s slippery materiality produces a transformative quality that enables beings like Cibi to move through and inhabit multiple ontologies. With this slippery materiality and transformative effect, then, flesh is, as Rivera notes, “always becoming;”[[5]](#footnote-5) flesh participates in a constant cycle of growth and decomposition, vulnerability and power, affect and violence. As flesh, the Cibi are always becoming, moving through human forms, animal appendages, plant photosynthesis, thing butchering, and cultured pastes, all while being “the perfect food.” [[6]](#footnote-6)

To become “the perfect food,” Cibi’s flesh is exposed and vulnerable to human actions, caught up in moments of violent rupturing, as flesh is carved and consumed. The violence Cibi experience is allied to flesh, since, as Sharon Betcher notes, while the body “can invite the hallucinatory delusion of wholeness,” flesh “admits our exposure, our vulnerability on to another.”[[7]](#footnote-7) With their subservient demeanours and pliant flavours, Cibi are a popular choice, complete with their own backpack and knife, which “is designed for exclusive use to slice Cibi’s flesh”[[8]](#footnote-8)—you do not even need your own utensils to butcher this flesh. Each modification to the Cibi has been done with human satisfaction and satiation in mind; humans can, like the story’s unnamed protagonist, simply wave at a wild Cibus and announce, “I’m hungry. Let me take a bite,”[[9]](#footnote-9) to which the obliging Cibus simply replies, “gotcha,”[[10]](#footnote-10) readying themself for consumption. Despite this visceral image of human mouth gouging Cibus flesh in one rapacious bite, the exchange, in practice, is more visually palatable, with the Cibus morphing into an anonymous paste for “squeamish consumers,”[[11]](#footnote-11) that one simply slices, before “it goes back to its human form.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In this exchange, as with other moments of flesh consumption, violence is often managed, either by diluting the violence—in the Cibi’s case, changing the form of the flesh from squeamishly human to delectably paste-like—or concentrating the violence—by creating an image of human mouth gouging Cibus flesh. Each image and action of managed fleshy violence to Cibi reinforces the idea that Cibi flesh is ripe for consumption.

After being sliced and returning to their human form, the Cibus was “a bit smaller than before.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The protagonist’s “bite” alters both the Cibus’ paste and their human form, so that the Cibus’ flesh bears the markings of human violence. This process is repeated frequently, throughout the Cibus’ lifetime, since “it take years to consume a whole Cibus.”[[14]](#footnote-14) With every slice of Cibus comes a new mark of human violence, until it finally becomes an old chunk of paste to “return to the earth and biodegrade easily;”[[15]](#footnote-15) their violently marked flesh feeding the next generation of Cibi. These violent markings and traumatic legacies are inextricably linked to flesh, since, as Rivera explains,

Flesh carries histories—evolutionary and also social histories. The constitution of our flesh bears the marks of our personal lives. And our flesh carries traces of the histories of our communities—marks left by the food and medicines to which communities had access, by the qualities of the air our forebears breathed, by love and joy shared, by stress or violence endured.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The history of the Cibi population, held within their flesh, is violent but pliant consumption, where every bite is in service of the humans who created them. As such, the violent consumption of a Cibus permeates throughout the entire Cibi population, carrying a traumatic legacy, as old paste decomposes in Cibi fields. As well as marking Cibi flesh, during these human-Cibi consumptions, there is also a simultaneous marking of human flesh, too; while human flesh expands, Cibi flesh shrinks, each forever carrying the history of this exchange within their flesh.

Compliant rather than resistant, human-Cibi relationships appear mutually beneficial, with Cibi offering themselves up on a plate as indiscernible paste for hungry human mouths; it is even noted that “every cut promotes healthy growth in the same way pruning helps plants.”[[17]](#footnote-17) However, while the Cibi appear to be the “perfect food” for a speculative multispecies city, like many of the texts I discuss in the thesis, there is a tension underlying this seemingly harmonious relationship: what should our ethical obligation to the Cibi, as other fleshy beings, be? Tanaka attempts to work through some of these ethical obligations, through the affective relationship between the unnamed protagonist and her now deceased Cibus. As well as enthusiastically partaking in the “wild” Cibi’s flesh, the protagonist previously owned and sliced up her own Cibus, giving it a name and treating it as part of her family, before her feelings towards the Cibus complicated their all-consuming relationship. Like the protagonist, many families keep Cibi in their homes, and “those Cibi lovers tend to consume their Cibi less often,”[[18]](#footnote-18) even though, it is noted, “making a Cibus live longer requires cutting its flesh regularly.”[[19]](#footnote-19) As they are welcomed into families, then, different aspects of their shifting ontologies are focused; they become less like plants, things, and cultured beings, and more like humans or animals. Therefore, Cibi’s slippery materiality as flesh complicates their consumption, whereby, “you tend to forget that Cibi are nutrient sources once you start living with them;”[[20]](#footnote-20) both Cibi owners and consumers have difficulty determining their relationship with the Cibi and producing the ethical obligations that are appropriate for their situation.

As the protagonist grows closer with her Cibus, she, like the other “Cibi lovers” stops slicing her Cibus, choosing instead to watch it wither away: “I could no longer bring myself to slice my dear Cibus. As it became increasingly smaller, I lost heart. I locked myself with my Cibus in my room. I stopped walking it. As it wasn’t able to get enough sunlight, it withered away and died in my arms.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Once again, the Cibus’ flesh is marked and transformed by human hands, but, this time, no knife is involved. Instead, the Cibus’ flesh is changed, when the protagonist withdraws from her responsibilities, unable to perform the violent rituals of care required to keep her Cibus alive and producing flesh. By isolating herself from the outside world, the protagonist creates a hermetically sealed zone of decomposition, forcing both the Cibus and herself to crumble into chunks of paste and tears, as they partake in this affective experience. As it flows from Cibus to human and from human to Cibus, affect, as Mel Chen notes, “is something not necessarily corporeal and that it potentially engages many bodies at once, rather than (only) being contained as an emotion within a single body.”[[22]](#footnote-22) As they break down, the Cibi and the protagonist engage in this affective exchange, where affect is not contained within one of them, but, instead, it flows between them, transforming them into fragments of their former selves, forever changed by this moment of violent decomposition.

In capturing the shared affective experience cultivated between fleshy beings, the exchange between the Cibus and the protagonist exposes the challenge of living with and consuming these “edible creatures:” there is an ethical obligation towards the other fleshy beings that we encounter and traditionally consume as “nutrient sources.” As they wither away in a locked room, they force us to confront our current relationships with animals, plants, things, cultured beings, and other humans; there must be more productively affective, indistinct, and ethically aware modes of living as and with fleshy beings, like Cibi.

Throughout ‘A Life with Cibi,’ we are encouraged to consider the Cibi as flesh, as unifying and troubling seemingly disparate ontologies. However, through human-Cibi interactions—violent consumptions, traumatic traces, and affective relationships—we are also encouraged to begin seeing humans as flesh, too. As the knife slices flesh, mouth gauges paste, and flesh withers away, we find that humans and Cibi are caught up in these moments of fleshy exchange with one another. When we perceive humans as flesh, we are, as Rivera notes, “affirming that we belong to the same world [which] is such a commitment, one that links consenting to being flesh to ethical obligations toward others and the earth.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Flesh, while ontologically ambiguous, materially slippery, exposed, and subjected to violence, also encourages and highlights ethical obligations between other beings. While relationships between fleshy beings are often messy and fraught with complications, they are always asking us to work through our ethical obligations and speculate with one another. Therefore, flesh’s slippery, ephemeral, and exposed materiality tears open the borders between beings and encourages us to live within, what Matthew Calarco calls, this “zone of shared, exposed embodiment.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

## **Speculative Flesh Ecologies**

In affirming our fleshiness and considering our ethical obligations, we begin to experience what Matthew Calarco calls indistinction, whereby,

To inhabit this zone of indistinction is thus to find oneself in a surprising and profound relation with animals. To be human typically means to disavow the fact that we, too, are flesh—that we, too, are meat. But 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*.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Calarco, then, considers flesh’s potential edibility—its ability for us all to become an “edible creature” like the Cibi—as a route to indistinction between humans and animals. He comments on the uncomfortable tension that arises when humans consider their own edibility—to confirm their identity as a human, they must reject their fleshy edibility. Therefore, indistinction can be seen as implicitly posthuman, since it “aims to think about human beings and animals in deeply relational terms that permit new groupings and new differences to emerge, such that “the human” is no longer the center or chief point of reference.”[[26]](#footnote-26) In relinquishing these ontological identities,

both what we call human and what we call animal fall into an altogether different zone of profound and deep identity that requires us to use alternative, non-traditional concepts and ideas if we wish to speak about it. In other words, indistinction means that we have ethical and ontological work to do.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Calarco suggests that it is only through challenging these disparate ontologies and affirming our fleshiness, that we can progress towards a point of ethical indistinction between fleshy beings. To encourage the ethical and ontological work needed for indistinction, we need to work through “alternative, non-traditional concepts and ideas.” Speculative fiction is a particularly effective medium for exploring these alternative approaches because, as evidenced in Tanaka’s short speculative story, it draws influences from our current relationships with nonhumans and extrapolates, subverts, and complicates them, through speculative imaginings of alternate versions of these relationships. Throughout the thesis I analyse seven speculative fiction texts, all of which work through these “alternative, non-traditional concepts and ideas,” by creating and engaging with, what I have termed, “speculative flesh ecologies.”

Speculative flesh ecologies are fictional environments in which different kinds of flesh—human, animal, plant, thing, and cultured—interact with one another in ways that their ontologies and values are constantly in flux. The concept of speculative flesh ecologies, as it is proposed and developed in this thesis, offers an approach to making sense of the seemingly disparate ontological identities of flesh and our ethical obligation towards them, by articulating a connection between 21st century speculative fiction’s interest in approaches to nonhuman ways of living that prioritise indistinction and the ethical obligations that thinking as and with flesh encourages. Speculative flesh ecologies emerge from a form of speculative thinking that does not draw boundaries around what flesh is, recalling Rivera’s “slippery materiality.” Instead, they embrace the seemingly disparate ontologies of humans, animals, plants, things, and cultured beings, in order to make present new forms of ethical thinking that explore what it means to live as, with, and through other fleshy beings. Like the flesh they contain, speculative flesh ecologies are “always becoming,” imagining new forms of fleshy indistinction that arise from human, animal, plant, thing, and cultured flesh.

Throughout my analyses of speculative fiction texts, I extend Calarco’s indistinction approach in new directions, arguing that we discover the different kinds of flesh being centralised in the fictions’ speculative flesh ecologies. To do so, I situate Calarco’s indistinction approach in relation to three other theoretical approaches that I have identified as working, in their own ways, in the sphere of indistinction: Michael Marder’s theorisation of grafts, Jane Bennett’s focus on vital materiality, and Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum. Paying attention to, and making more visible, the implicit interest in indistinction in each of these theorists, allows me to theorise the more expansive modes of fleshy existence imagined in speculative flesh ecologies, pushing indistinction beyond Calarco’s human and animal focus.

The texts that I analyse throughout the thesis draw out and focus on five different kinds of flesh: human, animal, plant, thing, and cultured. These five fleshes open up the category of flesh through their seemingly disparate ontologies, expanding our understanding of what it means to be and, indeed, to eat flesh. From animal agriculture and deforestation to waste pollution and “techno-fixes,” some of the biggest threats to our species ecologies can be best understood and engaged with in terms of these five kinds of flesh. Each chapter begins with an example drawn from the contemporary social world—a slaughterhouse attraction, plant documentary, oceanic pollution report, and a cultured flesh company. These examples allow us to see the contemporary relevance and investment in the threats to our species ecologies and in the different modalities of flesh. They also explain the cultural, political-economic, and representational complexity involved in the contemporary circulation of “flesh,” preparing the ground of the critical intervention that I find is made by the speculative fictions I discuss. In responding to the threats to our species ecologies, the five kinds of flesh are uniquely placed to generate the ontological ambiguities and ethical obligations that emerge in twenty-first century speculative fiction. It is certainly possible that in a longer study, this mode of analysis could be extended to focus on further kinds of flesh—fungal, viral, and bacterial. Indeed, in the wake of Covid-19, it would be especially valuable to explore the viral speculative flesh ecologies that might emerge in forthcoming speculative fictions, alongside another indistinct theoretical approach. However, I have chosen to restrict the focus here, in order to fully explore the depth and complexity of the five kinds of flesh at work in the speculative flesh ecologies of the texts I explore in the thesis. Furthermore, I argue that working outwards from animal flesh towards plant, thing, and cultured flesh is an important starting point in extending the imaginary of flesh in speculative ways.

With these different focuses of flesh—whether human, animal, plant, thing, or cultured—the chapters of the thesis are able to explore new perceptions of the various qualities of flesh, which push these ever-expanding indistinct approaches in new directions. Indeed, the speculative fictions I address, while centralising different kinds of relationships, all share the commonality of imagining speculative flesh ecologies that comment on twenty-first century contemporary issues, offer a way of living with other beings, and encourage ethical obligations to beings that we have historically and presently exploited, consumed, and discarded.

## **Fleshing out the Field: Speculative/Flesh/Ecologies**

My work emerges from a recent critical field of science fiction studies and species, the cultural role of flesh, and multi-species ecologies, which are all interested in the relationship between speculation, ontological identities, and more-than-human modes of existence. In order to chart this recent critical field and the major advances in these discourses over the last fifteen years, I explore each of the three terms that compose speculative flesh ecologies—speculative/flesh/ecologies—through key critical works, including Sherryl Vint, Mayra Rivera, and Donna Haraway. Each of these theorists offer a way of thinking about the three terms individually, which I then develop into the concept of speculative flesh ecologies.

Sherryl Vint’s *Animal Alterity* charts the question of the animal in science fiction, challenging the human-animal boundary through explorations of science fiction’s confronting “gaze of ‘absolute alterity.’”[[28]](#footnote-28) Vint makes a valuable connection between science fiction and animal studies, elucidating their shared interest in: 1) “foundational questions about the nature of human existence and sociality;” 2) “the construction of alterity;” and 3) “what it means to communicate with a being whose embodied, communicative, emotional and cultural life [. . .] is radically different from our own.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Science fiction and animal studies become useful co-ordinates for making sense of one another, with each offering crucial developments for exploring the human-animal boundary. When we use animal studies to interrogate alterity, ethics, and literature, Vint suggests that it “has wider implications than merely a new way of thinking about animal being;” instead, it “equally forces us to rethink our understanding of what it means to be human.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Science fiction’s imaginative worlds, with their extrapolated and non-normative human-animal encounters, then, extend and negotiate animal studies’ pursuit of posthuman ontologies and existences; as Vint notes, science fiction highlights that we have “always-already been living with ‘alien’ beings.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

From consumption, sentience, language, gender, and colonialism to aliens, humans-as-animals, human-made animals, and denial of the animal, the textual analysis that Vint offers throughout her work captures science fiction’s diverse representation of animals. Vint’s explorations of animal representations span from Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729) to Don LePan’s *Animals* (2009), with her texts rooted in the clearly defined genre of science fiction. As Vint comments, the texts “have no single perspective on the question of animals and their place in our world;” instead, they offer perspectives that are “sometimes challenging conventional wisdom and advocating a position of sympathy for the animal, and at other times embodying cultural anxieties about potential erosion of the human-animal boundary.”[[32]](#footnote-32) With its assortment of animal representations, science fiction offers us multiple routes towards understanding and exploring the question of the animal and the human-animal boundary, some of which may not come in the form of explicitly pro-animal narratives. Vint suggests that the most ubiquitous of these animal representations in science fiction “are interested in what animals experience and in how our social relations with them might be transformed.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Vint is cautious of these literary animal experiences, both in terms of their authenticity and their ability to deconstruct the human-animal boundary, but, she notes, “sf literature is a particularly productive site for exercising [. . .] sympathetic imagination, striving to put ourselves in the place of the animal other and experience the world from an estranged point of view.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Science fiction, therefore, is not only interested in *representing* animal experience, but it is also interested in *inhabiting* animal experience, generating a mode of affinity from a site of estrangement, where we can begin to work through the ontological complexities of the human-animal boundary. Alongside this “estranged point of view,” Vint suggests that a method for rethinking the human-animal boundary is to recognise “the embodied nature of human existence,” [[35]](#footnote-35) which we share with animals. When we reconnect with animals, she suggests, “we are also reconnecting with our embodied being, what might be thought of as our animal nature.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

Vint develops her interest in the ontological human-animal boundary to include the ethical obligations humans have towards non-humans, which, she suggests, both animal studies and science fiction are engaged in exploring.[[37]](#footnote-37) These ethical interests emerge from both the “social consequences of developments in science and technology,”[[38]](#footnote-38) the increasing invisibility of humans’ use of animals in contemporary society,[[39]](#footnote-39) and “the impending threat of even more animal extinctions and perhaps the collapse of our entire ecosystem.”[[40]](#footnote-40) As technological anxieties, invisible instrumentalizations, animal extinctions, and ecological breakdowns converge in both society and science fiction, the ethical implications of the human-animal boundary become pertinent and evident, developing alongside the ontological complexities of what we call “human” and “animal.” By challenging the human-animal boundary, Vint suggests that these ethical implications are not simply “restricted to the questions of our ethical duty towards other species; rather it relates more broadly to the philosophical foundations of ethical discourse as a whole, as well as to the political implications of biopolitics.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

While Vint’s work and mine share an interest in the representation, perspective, and experience of the nonhuman “other” in science fiction, Vint does not find in the science fiction texts she analyses accounts of a complicated or, indeed, dismantled limit between humans, animals, and non-animal nonhumans, like plants, things, or cultured beings. The twenty-first century speculative fictions I analyse engage with these more expansive boundaries and express these ideas in more experimental modes—for example, Johanna Stoberock’s fable-inspired tale, *Pigs* (2019), and Joseph D’Lacey’s horror-coded, *Meat* (2008)—as well as capturing the global-reach (Australia, UK, USA, Singapore, and Taiwan) of the twenty-first century anxieties they explore. As such, the speculative fictions I analyse throughout the thesis push at the limits of the ontological and ethical boundaries between humans and nonhumans, exploring how the speculative flesh ecologies of speculative fiction offer indistinct and expansive modes of fleshy existence between humans and nonhumans. Speculative flesh ecologies are bound to indistinction; however, Vint’s alterity rubric works in the same mode as, what Calarco calls, the “difference” approach to animal ethics, rather than “indistinction,” whereby the difference approach seeks “to develop a pro-animal ethic and philosophy based not on similarity, continuity, or identity but instead on an appreciation of the manifold differences that exist between and among human beings and animals.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Although the difference approach has its benefits—critiquing “the classical binary opposition separating The Human and The Animal” as “too simplistic and reductive to capture the ontological and ethical richness of human and animal life”[[43]](#footnote-43)—it fails to move beyond the guidance of anthropological difference. Therefore, speculative flesh ecologies are needed as an addition to Vint’s alterity rubric, in order to make sense of the complex and indistinct species ecologies explored in twenty-first century speculative fiction.

Focusing on the fleshiness of speculative flesh ecologies, Rivera’s *Poetics of the Flesh* and its materialist approach provides a productive route towards understanding the importance of flesh in historical and contemporary culture and thought. Rivera traces flesh through theological, philosophical, and socio-political texts, exploring “the intersections between bodies, material elements, and discourses through concepts of “body” and “flesh.””[[44]](#footnote-44) Marking a distinction between “body” and “flesh,” Rivera grapples with the ontological ambiguity—the “slippery materiality,” as she terms it—of flesh, noting that this changeability, this formlessness, this process of “always becoming,”[[45]](#footnote-45) is what delineates “flesh” from “body.”[[46]](#footnote-46) While this ontological ambiguity may appear to negate flesh’s active presence, Rivera asserts, instead, that this slippery materiality allows flesh to cross “the boundaries between the individual and the world,”[[47]](#footnote-47) and remind “us that the boundaries between individual bodies and the world are porous, provisional, elusive.”[[48]](#footnote-48) This formlessness, changeability, porosity, and always becoming is a crucial framing for the way I engage with the flesh of speculative flesh ecologies, throughout the thesis. Flesh’s slippery materiality allows it to render even the most ontologically disparate beings indistinct; as such, they are always engaged in a process of becoming with and through one another. Rivera, too, recognises that fleshy materiality is an aspect of nonhuman existence, noting “the fabric of flesh is not simply human,”[[49]](#footnote-49) but, instead, it is made up of air, water, soil, animals, bacteria, and inorganic matter; therefore, she states, “the boundaries between human and nonhuman flesh are porous and provisional.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Despite this promisingly expansive approach to flesh, Rivera’s focus remains resolutely on the fleshiness of humans, and she is not interested in analysing flesh’s capacity to push at spanning across domains of humans *and* nonhumans, of the living *and* non-living. Throughout the thesis, I develop Rivera’s initially expansive approach to flesh and argue that twenty-first century speculative fiction is particularly interested in how flesh spans across the domains and produces indistinction between humans and nonhumans, between the living and non-living, via speculative flesh ecologies.

Tied to flesh’s ontological ambiguity, Rivera suggests, is flesh’s ability to carry memories and evolutionary and social histories.[[51]](#footnote-51) Flesh, “carries traces of the histories of our communities—marks left by the food and medicines to which communities had access, by the qualities of the air our forebears breathed, by love and joy shared, by stress or violence endured.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Each experience and mark made on flesh—whether violent or benevolent—leaves lasting impressions, forever bleeding these histories in, through, and with other fleshy beings. Therefore, with its manifold temporality, flesh carries, inhabits, traces, and expresses the histories and memories of the flesh that was, is, and is yet to be. Developing the historical traces of flesh that Rivera marks, I analyse how speculative fiction texts explicitly imagine and engage with both the historical, present, and speculative traces of flesh, through speculative flesh ecologies. Often, in these fictions, flesh makes contact with flesh—it nudges, lodges, and consumes—so that each fleshy being in the speculative flesh ecologies is transformed and shaped by the other; speculative flesh ecologies bear the marks of the flesh within them.

Building on flesh’s slippery materiality and historical traces, Rivera illustrates the ethical obligations that emerge, when we think of ourselves and other beings as flesh. She notes that “affirming that we belong to the same world is such a commitment, one that links consenting to being flesh to ethical obligations toward others and the earth.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Here, Rivera incorporates ambiguous “others,” as well as the environment, into this realm of ethical consideration, opening flesh—even if predominantly human—up to ethical obligations and speculative existences. Rivera furthers this speculative ethical thinking, noting that “flesh shifts between empirical description and imaginative affirmation, which envision alternative modes of being and seek to foster their materialization.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Speculative flesh ecologies, as I explore them here, are ways of illustrating, exploring, and extrapolating from these alternative modes of being and imaginings that flesh already operates in. Alongside more general commitments, Rivera specifies a group of twenty-first century ethical challenges that that accompany affirming our fleshiness:

addressing ethical challenges of the twenty-first century, such as climate change, biotechnology, and genetics, among others, requires theories that go beyond the critique of discourses toward better understandings of the material conditions and effects of human practices.[[55]](#footnote-55)

And as I demonstrate, throughout the thesis, my analysis of speculative flesh ecologies in twenty-first century speculative fiction generates an approach that consolidates Rivera’s aim of a better understanding of the material conditions and effect of these twenty-first century ethical challenges. Speculative flesh ecologies actively imagine and encourage ethical obligations towards indistinctly fleshy beings.

Imagining species ecologies, Donna Haraway begins her book, *When Species Meet*, with an exploration of the species ecology of Jim’s dog. Jim’s dog is a “burned-out redwood stump covered with redwood needles, mosses, ferns, lichens—and even a little California bay laurel seedling for a docked tail”[[56]](#footnote-56) that resembles a sitting dog. When we look at Jim’s dog, our perspective oscillates between a sitting dog and a community of arboreal organisms, and both are simultaneously true, with each morphing into and shaping the other. As clumps of moss mimic locks of fur and knotted bark reproduces canine features, Haraway remarks on the plethora of species who exist with(in) Jim’s dog: “so many species, so many kinds, meet in Jim’s dog.”[[57]](#footnote-57) This arboreal canine, like the human body and its bacterial, fungal, and protistic inhabitants,[[58]](#footnote-58) becomes a site of multi-species encounter, constantly engaged in a process of “*becoming with* many.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Haraway describes this process of “*becoming with* many,” this grappling “inside the flesh,” these “mortal world-making entanglements,” as happening in contact zones.[[60]](#footnote-60) In a constant state of flux, these contact zones are caught up in processes of transformation, with Haraway remarking that Jim’s dog only remained for one season: “the next winter the shapes and light in the canyon did not vouchsafe a canine soul to animate the burned-out redwood.”[[61]](#footnote-61) As with Jim’s dog, species ecologies are constantly transformed from the outside by their environmental conditions, while simultaneously transforming from within—their multi-species assemblages growing and decaying, shifting and stagnating, communing and diverging.

Like my concept of speculative flesh ecologies, Haraway acknowledges that these multi-species encounters involve both living and non-living beings, who “are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Therefore, each dog, tree, plant, fungi, and rock, participates in the species ecology of Jim’s dog as a contact zone. She refers to these living and non-living participants as “figures,” which are “material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another.”[[63]](#footnote-63) With their transformative qualities, figures reaffirm the constant “*becoming with* many” of species ecologies, like Jim’s dog. Furthermore, figures move throughout planes of speculation and reality, whereby, they are “at the same time creatures of imagined possibility and creatures of fierce and ordinary reality; the dimensions tangle and require response.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Finding common cause with the oscillation between speculation and reality in Haraway’s work, I argue that speculative fiction texts redouble these figures, contact zones, and species ecologies, through their engagement with speculative flesh ecologies. To the extent that the speculative texts I analyse imagine reality—animal agriculture, deforestation, waste pollution, and “techno-fixes”—to inform their speculative flesh ecologies, they show how speculative aesthetic forms are a route towards “*becoming with*,” providing new entry points for exploring and understanding the complex species ecologies that Haraway references.

Haraway suggests touch as one approach for experiencing species ecologies and in doing so brings us explicitly to the rubric of flesh. When we touch—either physically or visually—we touch “all the important ecological and political histories and struggles of ordinary small cities that have asked, Who should eat whom, and who should cohabit? The rich naturalcultural contact zones multiply with each tactile look.”[[65]](#footnote-65) As we touch other species in the contact zones of species ecologies, we experience more than just tangible sensations, communicating ideas, histories, and affects across species boundaries; as she notes, “when I ask whom I touch when I touch a dog, I learn something about how to inherit in the flesh.”[[66]](#footnote-66) Species ecologies, then, are experienced both by and through contact with the flesh of multifarious kinds of others, and this is something I explore in more detail through the living and non-living flesh that composes speculative flesh ecologies. Not only does touch allow us to experience species ecologies, Haraway argues, but it also “ramifies and shapes accountability,” where “caring for, being affected, and entering into responsibility are not ethical abstractions [. . .]. Touch, regard, looking back, becoming with—all these make us responsible in unpredictable ways for which worlds take shape.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Here, the tactility of the contact zones opens onto questions about our obligations towards other species; when we enter into these contact zones, we are confronted with the reality of our shared, material existence and affective experience, our shared “*becoming with*.” The speculative flesh ecologies that I track throughout the thesis, engage with violent, vulnerable, and visceral forms of contact in twenty-first century speculative fiction, generating pressing questions about the ethical obligations and ontological identities of the fleshy beings who exist within them, some of which do not emerge through Haraway’s companion species rubric. To meet the demand posed here, and to enrich the ethical dimension of the space of species ecologies that Haraway is working within, I demonstrate the importance of drawing on a wider range of theorists. Tracing species relationships through Matthew Calarco, Michael Marder, Jane Bennett, and Jean Baudrillard, I build a fuller sense of how companion relations can be better understood through the indistinction of flesh as sites of ontological and ethical complexity and potentiality. As such, speculative flesh ecologies—as explored in speculative fictions—are needed as a development of Haraway’s companion species rubric, to engage with more expansive ontological identities and ethical obligations.

## **Fictional Slipperiness**

This thesis argues that a strand of twenty-first century speculative fiction has emerged with an interest in speculative flesh ecologies. These texts are interested in radicalising and extending our understanding of flesh across the speculative flesh ecologies, by challenging the reader to respond ethically to fleshy others. Throughout the thesis, I will be exploring the speculative flesh ecologies at work in these fictions, demonstrating that, in the texts, the indistinction of flesh spans across seemingly disparate fleshy ontologies and generates new ethical positionalities. With material that spans a range of different global contexts—Australia, Singapore, Taiwan, UK, and US[[68]](#footnote-68)—the speculative fictions analysed in this thesis complicate the boundaries between human, animal, plant, thing, and cultured life, through their operationalisation of fleshiness. Speculative flesh ecologies aim to complicate the conventional understanding of flesh as “the soft substance, *esp*. the muscular parts, of an animal body,”[[69]](#footnote-69) opening flesh up to seemingly disparate ontologies. Therefore, through their speculative flesh ecologies, the texts challenge our thinking about relational ontologies and ethical positionalities.

Ontological ambiguities and slippery materialities abound in the speculative fictions—unidentified scraps of dried flesh, visceral slabs of pulsating flesh, and proliferating vines of regenerative flesh—generating ethical possibilities through indistinction. By navigating human, animal, plant, thing, and cultured flesh in their speculative flesh ecologies, I argue that the texts maintain the slippery materiality and ontological ambiguity of flesh, so that the ethical positionality of one kind of flesh is not prioritised over another. In this sense, the texts find common cause with Calarco, when he questions perfectionist approaches to moral consideration:

while it might not be unreasonable to consider the possibility that animals who are subjects [. . .] could have a moral claim on us, are we also to believe that animals without any sort of subjectivity, as well as insects, dirt, hair, fingernails, ecosystems, and so on could also have a claim on us? [. . .] Is it at all reasonable to conclude that there is a genuinely rational or objective way to determine the limits of moral status? And does not a historical survey of the failures that have attended every such attempt to draw *the* line (or lines) of moral considerability provide enough evidence to persuade common-sense moral discourse that this approach is inherently pernicious, both morally and politically?[[70]](#footnote-70)

Calarco’s speculative thinking on moral consideration does not draw boundaries between disparate ontological identities; instead, he proceeds from an ethical agnosticism that combats the historical failures of drawing definitive lines between beings “worthy” of moral consideration. As an alternative, Calarco proposes universal consideration, where it “would entail being ethically attentive and open to the possibility that anything might take on a face; it would also entail taking up a skeptical and critical relation to the determinations of moral consideration that form the contours of our present moral thinking.”[[71]](#footnote-71) In other words, “an ethics of universal consideration requires us to keep the question [of moral consideration] wide open.”[[72]](#footnote-72) The speculative flesh ecologies of the texts analysed throughout this thesis, too, leave the question of moral consideration wide open, through the ontological ambiguity and ethical possibilities of flesh.

Chapter One, ‘“We Wouldn’t Ever Eat Anybody, Would We?”: Human/Animal Flesh and Indistinction in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Joseph D’Lacey’s *Meat* (2008),’ interrogates the distinction between humans and animals, by using Calarco’s indistinction approach to explore narratives of human flesh consumption and what I term the “ideology of distinction.” The speculative flesh ecologies at work in these novels place humans in the positions typically reserved for farmed animals, where humans keep humans captive, mutilate their bodies, and butcher their flesh, before consuming them to sustain their own flesh. Focusing on these moments of human flesh consumption, I argue that the fictions’ speculative flesh ecologies utilise cannibalism to demonstrate both the instability of humans’ status as inedible and, therefore, the instability of the human/animal distinction, which is ideologically maintained, but also adapted and challenged throughout the novels. In moments of carefully constructed violence, the fictions facilitate the alternative approach of indistinction, through which, when characters acknowledge and accept their edibility, they are able to imagine and implement other ways of living.

*The Road* is a rich and popular site of literary analysis, with scholars often mining the text for human-centred meanings, from its account of patriarchal power structures[[73]](#footnote-73) to theological interpretations.[[74]](#footnote-74) However, by focusing on its speculative flesh ecology, my analysis of the novel shifts the focus towards a posthuman interpretation, where cannibalism is reframed from straightforwardly horrific to troublingly indistinct. By piecing together McCarthy’s fleshy fragments and cannibalised identifiers, my analysis reveals that the text is brimming with edible becomings and indistinct possibilities in a speculative flesh ecology which challenges the ideology of distinction. The richly allusive and elusive novel is filled with narrative puzzles and ambiguous narrational techniques, which complicate “all the things he saw and did not see.”[[75]](#footnote-75) These literary strategies provide us, instead, with alternative interpretations and indistinct approaches. *Meat*, on the other hand, is a piece of genre fiction, filled with blood-curdling violence and spine-chilling indoctrination that invites its reader to join in with the sacred feast of Abyrne (*Meat*’s ideologically controlled, cannibal practising town). While analyses of *Meat* have focused primarily on the horrors of humans’ reduction to edible flesh, [[76]](#footnote-76) my analysis of the novel’s speculative flesh ecology illustrates that humans’ edibility is filled with ontological and ethical potential that actively produces alternative possibilities like indistinction. *Meat*’s strength lies in its ability to show both the adaptation and manipulation of the ideology of distinction for cannibalised desires and the challenge to the ideology through moments of strange speculation. The novel intersperses its explicitly violent narrative with stark moments of strange speculation; from children’s tea parties to unholy communions, these strange speculations offer up challenges to the adapted ideology of distinction and unsettle the clean-cut horror of cannibalism. As dolls become flesh and cattle are liberated, “we know that their bodies and our bodies can become something more, something beyond the “mere” meat to which the dominant culture tries to reduce them.”[[77]](#footnote-77) My analysis of the novels highlights how their cannibal-filled speculative flesh ecologies dismantle the ideology of distinction and produce alternative ontological and ethical relations in the form of indistinction.

Chapter Two, ‘“I Gave Them Fruit”: Plant Flesh and Grafts in Sue Burke’s *Semiosis* (2018),’ develops the ontological and ethical indistinctions explored through human and animal flesh in chapter one. Using Michael Marder’s work on plants—specifically *Grafts*—alongside Calarco’s indistinction approach, this chapter pushes indistinction into botanical territories to unearth how we can begin to see that “we are also *like plants*.”[[78]](#footnote-78) *Semiosis*’ speculative flesh ecology explores seemingly more disparate ontologies and raises ontological and ethical questions about the inevitable need to consume that are not raised in *The Road* and *Meat*.

This chapter’s focuses on a singular novel, rather than a comparative analysis between two texts, like the other three chapters, stems from plants’ often overlooked capabilities and participation in fiction, alongside *Semiosis*’ original and sophisticated engagement with plants as fleshy participants in a species ecology. In the majority of speculative fiction, plants remain on the periphery of ontological and ethical consideration, functioning solely as a source of horror or ornamental scenery, which limits their potential to take an active role in the alternative forms of multi-species communities made possible through indistinction. As well as *Semiosis*, there is another speculative fiction that explore plants’ capabilities and participation in ecologies: Brian Aldiss’ *Hothouse* (1962), which features sentient plants who, with their extrapolated capabilities, dominate the planet’s ecology. However, *Semiosis* is the only twenty-first century speculative fiction text, to my knowledge, to offer a rich exploration of plant life that centralises the fleshy interactions between plants and humans. While it would have been possible to conduct a comparative analysis of *Hothouse* and *Semiosis*, it was important that the speculative fictions in my thesis were all twenty-first century texts, in order to maintain and strengthen the engagement with the contemporary threats to our species ecologies that open each of the chapters. Furthermore, while many other texts fail to tap into the fleshiness of plants, either haptically or theoretically, *Semiosis* actively engages with the fleshiness of plants, exploring plants’ fleshy consumption, as both the consumer and the consumed, that helps to foster alternative indistinct ways of living with plants, like mutualism. Therefore, *Semiosis* is unparalleled as a twenty-first century speculative fiction that imagines an eclectic array of sprouting characters, from flesh-eating snow vines to the semiotically-communicative Stevland.

Each plant that grows in the soil of *Semiosis*’ Earth-like planet, Pax, challenges humans’ limited and instrumentalized view of plants’ ontological identity and ethical positionality. As I analyse moments of plant flesh consumption and communication in the novel, this chapter argues that *Semiosis* troubles the clean-cut instrumentalization and consumption of plant flesh, imagining alternative multi-species relationships that grapple with the moral problems posed by the inevitable need to consume and of plant capabilities. With ontological and ethical reconfigurations of plant flesh, we risk complicating humans’ inevitable consumption of plants. However, as the speculative flesh ecology at work in *Semiosis* shows, plant flesh, unlike animal and human flesh, is able to sustain, regenerate, and proliferate, even after parts of it have been consumed. Consuming plant flesh, in this case, does not necessitate total instrumentalization. Among moments of violent instrumentalization, *Semiosis*’ botanically abundant speculative flesh ecology shows us how to grapple with the inevitable need to consume plants and, as Marder enjoins, “to grow not *against* but *together with* the environment, including other human beings, animals, and plants!”[[79]](#footnote-79)

Chapter Three, ‘“The Pigs Ate Every*thing*”: Thing Flesh and Vital Materialism in Johanna Stoberock’s *Pigs* (2019) and Wu Ming-Yi’s *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011),’ explores the concept of “thing flesh,” expanding chapter two’s focus on multi-species communication and grappling with moments of seemingly pernicious indistinction. I use Jane Bennett’s vital materialist approach to make sense of the most disparate ontological interactions portrayed in these texts, exploring the affective and transformative power of thing flesh and the indistinct possibilities that arise from opening ourselves up to the power of thing flesh. The novels transform the infinite and haunting impressions of marine debris into playful yet disturbing speculative fables, where children feed rubbish to pigs and one boy makes a home among the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. As I analyse moments of thing flesh’s affective power, consumption, contact, and transformation, this chapter argues that these fictions’ speculative flesh ecologies pave alternative routes towards indistinction which rely on attending to the affective relationships between fleshy beings. Their speculative flesh ecologies also suggest that there is power in being transformed by and into thing flesh; they generate new indistinct possibilities for the animals and humans who find themselves objectified within the pages of *Pigs* and *The Man with the Compound Eyes*.

Stoberock’s fable-inspired fiction, *Pigs*, is yet to be critically analysed. My analysis offers a pioneering exploration of how the novel’s speculative flesh ecology operationalises things’ fleshiness to create indistinct ontological identities across species boundaries. *Pigs* is filled with playful moments of ontological experimentation and haunting scenes of ethical fluctuation, which complicate the island and its inhabitants’ identity as universal garbage collectors. As garbage nudges against flesh and pigs swallow endless streams of waste, flesh’s porosity and exposed embodiment is reified through interactions with thing flesh. I argue that thing flesh generates not only a universal indistinction between flesh, but also an individual indistinction between smaller groupings of fleshy beings: an old man and five grieving pigs, a young girl and a pair of glasses, and the rubbish and those who discard it. Like *Pigs*, Wu’s *The Man with the Compound Eyes* combines playful imagination with haunting reality. From a home on a garbage patch to whale avatars, Wu imbues the novel with expansive ontological experiences, building the foundations for further speculative thinking and indistinct ways of living. While scholars have commented on Wu’s object-oriented focus in the novel,[[80]](#footnote-80) my analysis and exploration of the novel’s speculative flesh ecology develops relational ontologies across species boundaries, through the concept of thing flesh, capturing how thing flesh’s affective power works indistinctly across humans, animals, and the environment. In the novel, thing flesh is both dangerously haunting, littering malevolent impressions in its wake, and productively indistinct. As thing flesh floats through the novel’s speculative flesh ecology, it encourages us to not draw hard boundaries around what flesh is or what flesh could speculatively become. As the novels’ speculative flesh ecologies further throw the ontological identities and ethical positionalities of flesh into flux, Bennett notes that “the ethical task [of the vital materialist] at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it.”[[81]](#footnote-81) Through my analysis of the novels, I demonstrate how their thing flesh littered speculative flesh ecologies generate affective relationships between things, humans, animals, and the environment, encouraging us to be open to the ontological and ethical indistinctions that are produced from acting in, through, and with thing flesh.

Chapter Four, ‘“Actual Real Proper Meat”: Cultured Flesh and Simulacra in Mat Blackwell’s *Beef* (2016) and Vina Jie-Min Prasad’s ‘A Series of Steaks’ (2017),’ explores the idea of cultured flesh as *real* meat. This chapter develops chapter three’s exploration of animals-as-thing flesh, by complicating the ontological distinctions between fleshy beings and their material traces, between actual animals and cultured flesh. I collate Baudrillard’s work on the *real*, animals, flesh, and science fiction, and read it alongside Calarco’s indistinction approach, in order to explore the *realness* of cultured flesh’s *real* meat. Read with these theoretical approaches, I argue that the fictions expose the indistinction between *real* cultured flesh and actual animal flesh, so that it is no longer possible to discern the real from the imaginary, the animal from the cultured. The texts offer multi-layered renderings of cultured flesh’s production, consumption, and existence, which push cultured flesh into haunting, performative, and camp extrapolations of twenty-first century’s cultured flesh experiments. As I analyse the way cultured flesh’s *realness* is grown and performed, this chapter argues that, while cultured flesh is engaged in the dual obfuscation and indistinction of animal flesh, the speculative flesh ecologies of *Beef* and ‘A Series of Steaks’ demonstrate the ontological indistinction and ethical slipperiness between cultured flesh and actual animals.

Blackwell’s cultured flesh satire, *Beef*, has not yet received scholarly attention. However, my analysis of the novel highlights *Beef* as a text rich with extrapolations of cultured flesh’s promised solutions, ontological ambiguities, and indistinct and obfuscated animals. I argue that the novel subverts the polished messaging of cultured flesh companies, troubling the *realness* of their meat and the presence of animals in their cultured flesh, through the introduction of the disturbingly real semi-living beings: the vat-creatures. As cultured flesh grows on mechanical bodies and fathers hide their animal flesh eating activities from their children, I explore how *Beef*’s vat-creatures and animal remnants satirise cultured flesh as a “techno-fix,” by exposing a cultured flesh future to be one where reality is obfuscated and meat is murder. In *Beef*, cultured flesh’s indistinction from animal flesh is more than skin deep. Like *Beef*, Prasad’s ‘A Series of Steaks,’ too, has not yet been the subject of thorough analysis, with research simply citing the novelette’s depiction of 3D-printed cultured flesh.[[82]](#footnote-82) However, my analysis of Prasad’s fiction explores the complex presentation and marketing of cultured flesh’s *realness*, through the text’s “fake beef.” I argue that fake beef’s ontological ambiguity and performativity further complicates cultured flesh’s *realness*. Caught up in this complex production of *realness*, fake beef reaffirms the indistinction between *real* meat and actual animals, both ontologically and ethically. As cultured flesh covers up cruel farming practices and cute cow logos appear inside perfectly printed steaks, the novelette generates a critical perspective on the purported ethical potential of cultured flesh. In ‘A Series of Steaks,’ cultured flesh’s *realness* is used to obfuscate the violent reality of actual farmed animals, but, as the characters realise, it can also be subverted and used as a tool of ethical exposure. My analysis of the novels argues that their cultured flesh filled speculative flesh ecologies force us to be critical of the “techno-fixes” that thrive on feeding us flesh and encourage us to expand our indistinct ontologies to pulsating and perfectly marbled pieces of cultured flesh.

## **A Life with Cibi**

Returning to ‘A Life with Cibi,’ through the literary approach of speculative flesh ecologies, encourages us to consider flesh not just as a way of unifying disparate ontologies, but as a way of exploring what each of these different forms of flesh might offer in terms of indistinction and ethical obligations towards nonhuman beings. Acknowledging the fleshy similarity of humans and animals puts us on the path to indistinction by acknowledging our shared edibility and our more-than-meat potential; plant flesh shows us how to navigate necessary consumption and live *with* other fleshy beings; thing flesh opens us up to the affective power of flesh; and cultured flesh teaches us to confront the uncomfortable indistinctions that arise from growing *real* meat. Through speculative flesh ecologies, we can begin to understand what it might look like to live a life *with* Cibi.

# “We Wouldn’t Ever Eat Anybody, Would We?”: Human/Animal Flesh and Indistinction in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Joseph D’Lacey’s *Meat* (2008)

## **Welcome to the Open Slaughterhouse[[83]](#footnote-83)**

In 2020, a total of 73,162,794,213 cows, chickens, pigs, and sheep were slaughtered globally for their flesh.[[84]](#footnote-84) It is often assumed that consumers are unaware of the slaughterhouse processes involved in rendering 73,162,794,213 animals into packaged chunks of flesh; if people were to *see* the violent process of the slaughterhouse and look into the eyes of the terrified and dying animals that become their food, they would no longer be able to consume them or support their slaughter. However, what if there was a slaughterhouse with glass walls, where visitors could oversee the entire process?

Visit Danish Crown’s slaughterhouses in Horsens or Holsted, Denmark, and you can do just that, watching the process of the slaughterhouse from the factory-length visiting gallery, where “it is thereby possible to follow all processes from slaughtering of the live animals to the belly roast leaving the plant 24 hours later.”[[85]](#footnote-85) Visitors can watch as cows become steak and pigs become bacon; they enter as animals and leave as chunks of flesh. The photo accompanying this call for visitors features children staring down at a processing room, through a giant glass window, where slabs of flesh slide along conveyors, pile up in white bins, and hang on gambrels. These slaughterhouse processes are so appealing, it seems, that their managed violence is even child friendly.

If you are unable to visit the slaughterhouses in person, Danish Crown have even created a virtual slaughterhouse tour, ‘Welcome to the Open Slaughterhouse,’[[86]](#footnote-86) and published their own magazine, ‘24 Hours at the World’s Most Modern Slaughterhouse,’[[87]](#footnote-87) where they take you through the process of working in a slaughterhouse—even from the comfort of your armchair, you, too, can visit Danish Crown. Entering the virtual slaughterhouse, you are greeted with an auto-playing carousel of videos, featuring graphic content of cows and pigs being transported, anaesthetised, killed, butchered, and packed. No process is too violent for this explicit virtual visit, with videos of cows being stunned with bolt guns, pigs being stunned with carbon dioxide, and both animals being bled and butchered, readily available for their virtual visitors. This virtual slaughterhouse seems to have glass walls, indeed. In the magazine, from pictures of pressure-washed rivers of blood to a close-up of a pig’s seemingly terrified face, each stage of the process is photographed, described, and time-stamped for our viewing. At 7:34am, workers in sanitary blue outfits slice up animals; at 10:15am, they gaze up at their handywork, proud of their safety standards; at 12:17pm, they join one another in the break room for food; at 5:01pm, visitors are shown around the slaughterhouse; and at 10:25pm, chunks of butchered flesh are displayed in overlapping rows. Each time-stamped process contributes to the smooth-running of this well-bloodied machine. To elucidate these images of living and butchered animals, Danish Crown note proudly that the pigs are “*gently* herded through a *carefully* designed system with partitions, sloping floors and lighting, which helps the animals behave *naturally* [my emphasis].”[[88]](#footnote-88) In its sanitised transparency, these slaughterhouses—actual, virtual, and printed—offer carefully managed violence, promoting not only efficiency but welfare, too.

The final photograph of the magazine features two halves of a pig’s body sliced down the middle to reveal the viscera within. Flesh pushes out from the skin of their amputated arms, nipples cover either side of the incision line, and air fills the gaps where organs once pulsated and life once lived. Behind this centralised corpse are seemingly infinite duplications, each one bearing the same violent markings and butchering to their flesh. As the two halves hang there, they recall—almost too perfectly—Francis Bacon’s ‘Figure with Meat’[[89]](#footnote-89) and ‘Painting 1946,’[[90]](#footnote-90) which both feature gambreled corpses and chunks of flesh. Unlike the photograph used by Danish Crown to promote their slaughterhouses, Bacon’s paintings illicit a different response; for Gilles Deleuze, “if there is feeling in Bacon, it is not a taste of horror, it is pity, an intense pity for the flesh, including the flesh of dead animals.”[[91]](#footnote-91) With their uncannily similar subjects and composition, Bacon’s indiscernible flesh paintings encourage us to view Danish Crown’s butchered flesh photograph through this lens of pity, too.

With its sanitised transparency and “glass walls”—both inside the slaughterhouse and online—Danish Crown’s slaughterhouses allude to another reason for humans’ continued slaughtering, butchering, and consumption of animals, rather than simply ignorance and misinformation: the ideology of distinction. The ideology of distinction is a term that I use to describe the ideological construction of ontological exceptionalism demarcating humans from all other animals, which undergirds the distinction between humans as consumer and animals as consumed. Humans are permitted to “visit” the slaughterhouse—including leaving; therefore, as humans exit the slaughterhouse and close the tab on the magazine and the virtual slaughterhouse, they are enacting a privilege that is a means of operationalising the ideology of distinction. At Danish Crown, human visitors are never at risk of being held captive, killed, butchered, and consumed; instead, they are encouraged to come and go as they please, to feast on the flesh of animals as both food and spectacle.

Both Danish Crown’s sanitised transparency and the ideology of distinction’s ontological exceptionalism are challenged and subverted in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Joseph D’Lacey’s *Meat*. Unlike the consumers at Danish Crown, for many characters in the novels, it is not animal flesh that keeps them fed, but instead it is human flesh that “becomes” edible. From small, family-run, basement operations to mass feedlot-factory farming establishments, human flesh production and consumption is a widespread practice in both *The Road* and *Meat*, constituting the staple food in many of their speculative diets. This choice of human flesh is perhaps surprising; as Nick Fiddes notes, “human flesh, nutritious as it may be, is not normally on our menus.”[[92]](#footnote-92) Cannibalism, specifically anthropophagy, exists as, arguably, the ultimate culinary taboo, supporting human flesh’s inedible identity;[[93]](#footnote-93) however, both McCarthy’s and D’Lacey’s novels suggest that the ideology of distinction that insists on the distinct categories of inedible flesh and edible flesh is not stable, and we are only one power-hungry meat baron away from having human flesh on our plates.

In McCarthy’s *The Road*, hungry cannibals hunt flesh for food, threatening those who still cling to the ideological distinctions of the pre-apocalyptic world—in this crumbling wasteland, everyone is fair game. The novel follows the lives of an unnamed man and boy, as they navigate a speculative future ravaged by disaster, plagued by violence, and seemingly devoid of other fauna and flora. They spend their days merely trying to survive in an inhospitable landscape, constantly threatened by their environment, other humans, and their own choices. As they make their journey towards the sea in search of more habitable temperatures and food, they remain wary of the cannibals who might try to consume them, always affirming that they will never become cannibals and consume human flesh themselves. Despite their cautiousness, they do encounter cannibals and the remnants of their food in both the cellar of a house and at an abandoned fire. From mutilated-but-living humans and cooking equipment to hanging corpses and butchered flesh, as the man and the boy journey along the road, they encounter each stage of the slaughterhouse, watching, partaking, and escaping the violence that awaits cannibalised humans. Faced with both ethical challenges, as well as survival challenges, the boy often disagrees with his father, pleading with him to take a more sympathetic approach to those they meet along the road. From an old man who confusedly steals supplies to the supposed imaginary of a dog and a boy, the man remains stubborn in his self-preserving endeavours, while the boy attempts to offer refuge in whatever form he can. Therefore, while the man clings to the ideology of distinction, unable to face the possibility of his human flesh consumption—as both eater and eaten—the boy imagines speculative communities with both humans and nonhumans, yearning for kinship in catastrophe.

In the speculative future of *Meat*, the town of Abyrne feasts on human flesh, enabled by the adapted and theologically manipulated ideology of distinction. Like Danish Crown’s slaughterhouse, Magnus Meat Processing plant (MMP) relies on carefully managed violence and sanitised transparency to maintain the smooth-running of its well-bloodied machine. While the plant is kept separate from the rest of the town, every Townsfolk is aware that the flesh they are consuming is human flesh from the Chosen. The Chosen—*Meat*’s human food source—are brought into the plant as living “animals,” before leaving as chunks of flesh to feed the Townsfolk of Abyrne. Like visitors to Danish Crown’s slaughterhouse, D’Lacey invites us to visit MMP’s slaughterhouse, curating a sanitised transparency that supports the maintenance of the town’s adapted ideology of distinction. While MMP produce and sell the Chosen’s flesh, the religious leaders, the Welfare, ensure that the Townsfolk consume their flesh as part of a sacred duty. The novel follows Richard Shanti—MMP’s best bolt-gunner—as he questions his role in the town’s flesh theology and economy. Guilt-ridden by the eyes of every Chosen he stuns, Shanti refuses to consume the Chosen’s flesh, and he goes in search of an alternative existence in Abyrne’s wastelands. Shanti meets John Collins, a spiritual leader who does not consume flesh—even that of plants—opting instead to survive on the light of God. In Collins’ lock-up, Shanti listens and practices his teachings, while still stunning Chosen at the slaughterhouse, waiting for a moment to revolutionise this murderous industry. After months of planning, John Collins leads the revolution against MMP to free the Chosen, sacrificing his own life in the process. With MMP and the Welfare destroyed, Shanti leads the Chosen towards a future, where they will no longer be farmed for their flesh.

While Danish Crown expose the inner workings of the slaughterhouse, *The Road* and *Meat* expose the ideological distinctions necessary for the continued killing, butchering, and consumption of flesh. In their speculative flesh ecologies, we are invited to view cannibalism as a route to ontological and ethical speculation, where ideological distinctions between edible and inedible flesh become both productively challenged and dangerously troubling for their characters. McCarthy exposes the man and the boy to a series of slaughterhouse processes, perfectly timed to illustrate both the violence of flesh consumption and the ubiquity of cannibalism. The butchery of human flesh is on full display, but the man’s ideological fixity causes him to turn a blind eye to this new reality, placing both him and the boy in danger—clinging to the ideology of distinction is not suitable survival for this new world order. In *Meat*, D'Lacey offers us unfettered access to MMP’s slaughterhouse through *Meat*’s literary glass wall, showcasing the ideology of distinction at work and demonstrating how easily it can be manipulated to create new categories of edible and inedible flesh. *The Road* and *Meat*’s cannibal narratives, where humans become and consume flesh, actively unsettle the ideology of distinction, demonstrating its susceptibility to being challenged and dismantled as well as maintained and adapted. This chapter will argue that both *The Road* and *Meat* serve cannibalism up as an offering of ontological and ethical speculation; their depictions of human flesh consumption capture both the violent processes involved in becoming edible flesh and the ideological conditions necessary to maintain such distinctions between edible and inedible flesh, between animal and human flesh. Like the final photograph of Danish Crown’s magazine, the horrifying thematics of D’Lacey’s *Meat* and McCarthy’s *The Road* exist alongside an intense pity for flesh—both human and animal.[[94]](#footnote-94) By means of my analysis of the novels, their speculative flesh ecologies develop as ones where becoming flesh entails becoming more than flesh, too.

## **Indistinction**

How can we negotiate and actively challenge the ideology of distinction? How can we make sense of cannibalism’s disruptive potential? What alternative approaches might help us dismantle the ideology of distinction? Matthew Calarco provides a rich theoretical framework for answering these questions, in the form of what he terms “indistinction.” Calarco’s indistinction approach “aims to think about human beings and animals in deeply relational terms that permit new groupings and new differences to emerge, such that “the human” is no longer the center or chief point of reference.”[[95]](#footnote-95) One strategy of indistinction, Calarco suggests, is accepting ourselves—both humans and animals—as flesh; as he notes, “animals and human beings are deeply and profoundly indistinct in the fact that we are, all of us, potentially meat.”[[96]](#footnote-96)

Indistinction emerges as a response to both the ubiquity of animal exploitation, which is “built into the very fabric of society, into the material and immaterial infrastructure of our culture,”[[97]](#footnote-97) and the limits of two other rubrics for thinking about animals—identity and difference—proceeding “with a keen awareness of the pitfalls of creating clean and distinct ontological and ethical lines between human beings and animals.”[[98]](#footnote-98) Calarco encourages us to view the ontological and ethical distinctions between humans and animals as both violently troubling and ideologically contestable. Calarco captures the instability of these ontological and ethical distinctions between humans and animals, during a discussion with Carol J. Adams about Jacques Derrida’s concept of the carnophallogocentric subject. Calarco states that the subject “is never achieved once and for all. It must be repeatedly enacted, called into being in line with the conceptual-discursive-institutional ideal it invokes.”[[99]](#footnote-99) As well as being crucial for the maintenance of the carnophallogocentric subject, this constant, repeated enactment is crucial for maintaining the ideology of distinction. The ideology exists, in part, through repeated enactments of animal flesh consumption and the rejection of human flesh consumption. These enactments maintain not only the edibility of animals, but also the inedibility of humans. However, while these repeated enactments suggest that the ideology they uphold is both prolific and stable, Calarco suggests, in reference to carnophallogocentrism, that, since these repeated enactments must take place, it means that, in fact, “it is unstable, structurally open to being challenged and contested.”[[100]](#footnote-100) Since an ideology of distinction follows these repeated enactments, it, too, is open to being challenged.

Interrogating the concept of the human subject, Calarco suggests that “part of inhabiting the subject position of the human”—part of participating in the ideology of distinction—is not solely produced by consuming animal flesh, but, instead, it is also “to situate oneself and other human beings on the side of being fundamentally inedible.”[[101]](#footnote-101) In other words, the human subject consumes flesh to ensure that they are never consumed as flesh themselves. Indistinction forces humans to confront their edibility, whereby,

to see oneself as potentially edible [. . .] is to find oneself in a surprising, shocking alignment with animals; and to affirm and to live within the space of that alignment is ultimately to refuse the dominant culture’s way of creating a sharp split between human and animal.[[102]](#footnote-102)

When we view ourselves as flesh—as edible—we make room for ontological and ethical reconfigurations that disrupt the ideology of distinction.

To illustrate humans’ potential—and always present—edibility, Calarco engages with Val Plumwood’s experience of surviving a crocodile attack, where “for the first time, it came to me fully that I was prey.”[[103]](#footnote-103) Hunted by a crocodile, Plumwood is placed in the rare position of becoming food for an animal, of being seen as flesh. She notes that “it was a shocking reduction, from a complex human being to a mere piece of meat.”[[104]](#footnote-104) This recognition not only disrupts the seemingly distinct ontological categories of humans and animals, but it also demonstrates that the process of becoming flesh is not solely within human control; instead, a crocodile might decide to make you their prey. This feeling of becoming prey, of becoming a “mere piece of meat,” that Plumwood describes exemplifies the process of entering

into a zone of indistinction where the differences traditionally posited between human and animal dropped out. In such a zone, human beings are exposed, like animals, to the very best and the very worst, to immeasurable joys and the most horrific forms of predation.[[105]](#footnote-105)

Therefore, while Plumwood recounts the violent horror of her experience, upon reflection, she also acknowledges the ontological and ethical possibilities that arose from becoming prey: “reflection has persuaded me that not just humans but any creature can make the same claim to be more than just food. We are edible, but we are also much more than edible.”[[106]](#footnote-106) Calarco reiterates Plumwood’s idea of being both edible and more than edible, noting that “inasmuch as we share embodiment with animals, we know that their bodies and our bodies can become something more, something beyond the “mere” meat to which the dominant culture tries to reduce them.”[[107]](#footnote-107) Implicated in indistinction’s edible becoming, then, is an understanding of an alternative ethical possibility, which does not maintain distinct ontological or ethical categories between humans and animals, between inedible and edible; instead, indistinction requires seeing what we might all become, when we acknowledge our shared fleshiness.

Calarco draws on Bacon’s paintings and Deleuze’s analysis to demonstrate how it feels to inhabit this “zone of indistinction.” As he notes, “Bacon’s paintings often align human bodies with meat and exposed flesh” assisting “us in entering a zone of indistinction between human and animal.”[[108]](#footnote-108) As butchered flesh hangs in ‘Figure with Meat’ and ‘Painting 1946,’ it not only complicates the ontological and ethical distinctions between humans and animals, but, as Calarco notes, “by placing viewers within a zone of indistinction, Bacon encourages us to learn to see human bodies as edible,”[[109]](#footnote-109) too. Through Bacon’s indistinct paintings, then, our view of Danish Crown’s bisected pig halves is transformed; they are no longer solely sites of violence or pity, but, instead, they have become sites of indistinction. These indistinct implications are, of course, entirely unintentional on the part of Danish Crown; however, this indistinct effect transcends their intent, and we begin to envisage what it might be like to become edible. Through these indistinct imaginings and alternative fleshy ontologies, we engage in the idea of “risk,” where, Calarco notes, “Deleuze argues that we need to *risk* seeing ourselves as being like animals, as seeing both ourselves and animals as exposed, vulnerable, meaty bodies [my emphasis].”[[110]](#footnote-110) When we see ourselves as flesh, therefore, we risk exposing ourselves to the most visceral forms of violence, risk seeing our own bisected, butchered corpse on the back of Danish Crown’s magazine; yet, through this risk, there is also an opportunity, a possibility of alternative ontologies and ethical obligations, that emerge only from this space of violence and vulnerability, exposure and butchery, from the zone of indistinction. For Calarco, Bacon’s paintings capture this dual violence and opportunity of risk, since, he notes, “there is both tremendous beauty and tremendous horror in meat. It is capable of inciting an incredibly wide range of affects and emotions—all of which are lost if we hold that zone of indistinction among meaty bodies at arm’s length.”[[111]](#footnote-111) Through these horrifyingly artistic renderings of flesh, then, Calarco calls for us to embrace indistinction—to dwell in the horrifying yet beautiful visage of flesh, to risk seeing ourselves as edible, and to authentically imagine our flesh on the back page of Danish Crown’s magazine—and see what ontological and ethical possibilities might emerge.

If we choose to embrace indistinction, Calarco notes that it “means we have ethical and ontological work to do.”[[112]](#footnote-112) Indistinction is itself a speculative endeavour, engaged in imagining the possibilities that might emerge, when we see ourselves—human and nonhuman—as flesh. With indistinction’s speculative qualities, speculative fiction emerges as a rich medium for imagining “who [humans] and [animals] might become, what kinds of affects and relations we and they might encounter, what kinds of worlds we and they might constitute and inhabit.”[[113]](#footnote-113) As children envisage alternative futures and groups of humans are mutilated to become edible, both *The Road* and *Meat* imagine these kinds of becomings, affects, relations, and worlds, where ontological and ethical relations between flesh are in speculative flux. Through their speculative flesh ecologies—which are both violent, visceral, and vulnerable—we and they become “immersed in a world of “raw necessity,”” whereby, we begin to navigate “what other possibilities for life and thought might open up”[[114]](#footnote-114) for both humans and nonhumans.

An ideology of distinction lingers in the minds and collective consciousness of *The Road* and *Meat*’s characters, despite the shift from animal flesh consumption to human flesh consumption. While a speculative post-apocalyptic world, where human flesh is eaten, might offer to provide a radical critique of current forms of flesh consumption, it is undermined by the residual presence of an ideology of distinction. Therefore, by focusing on the strangeness of the conditioning moments of flesh consumption, in *The Road* and *Meat*, we begin to see, fundamentally, how flesh consumption is reinforced and maintained, both in speculative fiction and outside of it. Close readings of flesh consumption in the novels, then, not only expose the workings of an ideology of distinction, but they also actively reveal alternative ontological and ethical relations, through their negotiations of both *becoming* and *consuming* human flesh. For the novels, before flesh can be consumed, it must first go through a process of becoming, of entering the identity of the edible. In *The Road*, this becoming is achieved through apparatus remnants and spatial conditions, in the form of animal cooking equipment and housing. However, in *Meat*, this becoming takes a more gruesome turn, achieving its edible status through ritualised mutilations and graphic scriptures. Since the novels demonstrate a *becoming* that precedes a *consuming*, they reveal the constructed nature of an ideology of distinction and acknowledge that any being, regardless of species or status, is potentially edible. As such, the novels produce alternative ontological and ethical relations, in the form of Calarco’s “indistinction” approach. Through the revealing of human flesh’s *becoming* and *consuming*, all flesh is shown to be indistinct. The challenges to the ideology of distinction that the novels provide, then, not only contest the prevalence of the ideology in their speculative fiction worlds, but they also contest the ideology, as it functions, outside of the speculative fiction worlds.

## **Red and Salty Meat Inside**

In the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*, the man clings to the effigy of an ideology of distinction, maintaining an ontological and ethical distinction between humans and animals, despite the apparent absence of the latter. Throughout the novel, the fear of cannibalism haunts the man and the boy—in terms of both *becoming* edible human flesh and *consuming* human flesh—yet, the man maintains that he and his son are not edible, and they will never resort to consuming other humans: “We wouldn’t ever eat anybody, would we? […] No. No matter what.”[[115]](#footnote-115) He maintains the pre-apocalyptic notion that “human flesh is the ultimate culinary taboo, and cannibalism the ultimate act of transgression,”[[116]](#footnote-116) demonstrating how, as Matthew Mullins notes, “the refusal to satisfy hunger by eating humans signifies the adherence to a foundational set of beliefs that stipulates a good and bad, a right and wrong way to be human.”[[117]](#footnote-117) However, McCarthy complicates the ontological and ethical distinctions that the man holds between human flesh and animal flesh, between “good” and “bad” consumption, by situating the man’s consumption of supposed animal flesh alongside cannibalised identifiers. In the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*, then, the man’s ideological beliefs are no longer stable, no matter how strongly he clings to them, and his repeated enactments of the ideology begin to crumble.

In this new reality, the man and the boy spend their time on the search for food, rummaging around cupboards in derelict houses, hoping to find even the smallest morsel. Many of their searches yield very little, but, sometimes, they find leftovers from years gone by. These leftovers often include the remnants of canned goods, ranging from tinned fruit cocktail to tins of pork and beans. Since the man and the boy survive mainly on these products, Laura Wright suggests that they are “minimalistically vegan”: “in the past world, they would have eaten animal meat; in the present, as no animals aside from humans seem to exist, survival is by and large minimalistically vegan.”[[118]](#footnote-118) However, the man and the boy live a far from vegan existence, maintaining a distinction between their inedible human flesh and the edible flesh of animals, by repeatedly tucking into vestiges of flesh, wherever they can find them. While in a house, the man finds what he believes to be a piece of ham:

In an old batboard smokehouse they found a ham gambreled up in a high corner. It looked like something fetched from a tomb, so dried and drawn. He cut into it with his knife. Deep red and salty meat inside. Rich and good. They fried it that night over the fire, thick slices of it, and put the slices to simmer with a tin of beans. Later he woke in the dark and he thought that he’d heard bulldrums beating somewhere in the low dark hills. Then the wind shifted and there was just the silence.[[119]](#footnote-119)

Unlike many of the foods they find, which often come in labelled tins—and, if not labelled, at the very least, remain unopened—this piece of “ham” has no identifier. Visually, the flesh is indistinct, and it cannot be traced to a specific species identity. The man does not pause to question the origin of this fleshy lump; he disavows its fleshy ambiguity and the possibility of it being human flesh, stating, categorically, that it is “ham,” which he assumes to be the thigh of a dead pig. “Ham,” however, is also used to refer to the back of the knee or thigh, more generally, regardless of species identity.[[120]](#footnote-120) In reality, then, since only the leg remains, without other indicators, such as the rest of the body, the “red and salty meat inside” could be flesh from a number of species, including humans. McCarthy continues to inscribe the “ham” with ontological ambiguities, interweaving the discovery of the “ham” with telling puns and repurposed cooking equipment.

The man views the smokehouse as an indicator of animal flesh remains, where traditional curing practices reify his assumptions. However, in this post-apocalyptic world, traditions do not mean certainty. During the same search for food, the man and the boy enter a barn, where there is “a boar-hide nailed to a barndoor. Ratty. Whisp of a tail.” [[121]](#footnote-121) The barn, traditionally used to house animals, with its boar-hide-clad door acting as a signpost for animal remains, suggests that what lies inside would once have belonged to animals. With this assumption, the man and the boy venture inside, expecting to find traces of animals, which they might be able to use or consume; but, instead, “inside the barn three bodies hanging from the rafters, dried and dusty among the wan slats of light.”[[122]](#footnote-122) The barn’s usual inhabitants have been replaced with the dried, dead bodies of humans, dangling inside their makeshift mausoleum. This makeshift mausoleum becomes the first of many indicators that there are connections between the human bodies in the barn and the flesh in the “tomb” of the smokehouse, casting doubt on the man’s presumptions. These final resting place descriptors conflate one repurposed structure with another: the barn transforms from a holding place for animals into a mausoleum for three human bodies, while the smokehouse transforms from a curing place for animals into a tomb for a piece of unidentified flesh. Therefore, these repurposed structures, with their interwoven fleshy contents, cast doubt on the man’s insistence on the hammy-nature of the smokehouse flesh—if the barn can house human flesh, so, too, can the smokehouse.

These human flesh indicators are not limited to the exterior structures of the barn and the smokehouse; their innards are equally revealing, with McCarthy employing puns and visual similarities to further complicate the fleshy identity of the “ham.” The pun “gambreled” captures this fleshy ambiguity; while the smokehouse’s “gambrel” refers to the metal hanger used to hang carcasses for butchering, [[123]](#footnote-123) it also refers to the type of roof seen commonly on American barns. [[124]](#footnote-124) The pun connects the bodies in the barn with the flesh in the smokehouse because they both—whether gambrel roof or gambrel device—hang from their gambrels, mirroring each other, with their placement of flesh. As such, whether explicitly human or ambiguously fleshy, they hang there, “dried and drawn” and “dried and dusty,” as the man contemplates how to treat them: to shield them from his son’s eyes or allow him to feast on their flesh. The visual dryness of the flesh immediately links the barn bodies and the smokehouse flesh, but it is also a trope that McCarthy continues to return to, when regarding the bodies lying on roads and inside homes: “The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taunt as wires.”[[125]](#footnote-125) Since this dry fleshy quality is something that McCarthy repeatedly uses to describe human flesh, whether in the barn or on the streets, its application to the smokehouse flesh, once again, raises questions of the “ham’s” fleshy identity. Could it be, that cutting into the barn bodies, would also reveal “red and salty meat inside,” ripe for consumption?

McCarthy revisits these repurposed structures and tools, throughout the novel, using them as indicators of “all these things he saw and did not see,”[[126]](#footnote-126) imbuing each encounter with lingering doubts of fleshy identity. While scavenging around the grounds of the cannibal house, the man stumbles upon a makeshift stove, which he assumes is a pre-apocalyptic relic used for cooking animals:

In the yard was an old iron harrow propped up on piers of stacked brick and someone had wedged between the rails of it a forty gallon castiron cauldron of the kind once used for rendering hogs. Underneath were the ashes of a fire and blackened billets of wood. Off to one side a small wagon with rubber tires. All these things he saw and did not see.[[127]](#footnote-127)

Despite his knowledge and paranoia about cannibals, the man assumes that the makeshift equipment has been used for animals, like the smokehouse and its gambrel. Although the cauldron may have once been used for cooking the flesh of animals, in their absence, it has clearly been repurposed to cook the flesh of humans. However, the man’s maintenance of the ideology of distinction, which asserts the inedibility of human flesh, causes him to miss the warning signs of near-by cannibals and the fleshy identity of the smokehouse’s red and salty meat. Even the ashy remnants do not seem to warn him, until it is already too late.

Brushing off the ashy remnants of the cauldron, the man leads the boy inside the cannibals’ house and stumbles upon a hatch leading to a cellar. Thinking that it will contain “food,” the man prises the hatch open. However, much to his dismay, there are no tins or prybars;[[128]](#footnote-128) instead,

Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous.

Jesus, he whispered.

Then one by one they turned and blinked in the pitiful light. Help us, they whispered. Please help us.[[129]](#footnote-129)

Although the man appears shocked to find the humans in the cellar, from the large cauldron to the recent fire, there were clear indications of their presence. McCarthy not only makes these connections between the equipment in the cannibal yard and the humans in the cellar, but he also reinforces the connections between the bodies in the barn and the “ham” in the smokehouse. There is a continuous, explicit connection between presently consuming human flesh and traditionally rendering animal flesh. As such, McCarthy encourages the reader to return to the equipment in the yard, with its forty gallon cauldron and blackened fire, as the evidence for all the indicators that the man “did not see.”[[130]](#footnote-130) As the cauldron recalls the repurposed animal cooking equipment of the smokehouse, the association with “rendering hogs” makes the connection even more tangible and explicit. Like the boar-hide on the door, the image of rendering hogs connects these human flesh discoveries to the “ham” in the smokehouse. They are a set of piggy indicators that, together with the repurposed structures and equipment, cast doubt on the animal nature of the “ham.” What is revealed, after the pig imagery, is always human flesh.

The humans in the cellar also encourage a return to the “ham” in the smokehouse, through their missing limbs. As the severed limbs from the still living body of a man show, these humans are kept alive so that their flesh can be removed, cooked, and eaten, in the quantities needed to feed the cannibals. Their cauterised flesh becomes a visible and odorous reminder of their edibility. Furthermore, the particular limbs severed—their legs—make striking connections to the “ham” in the smokehouse. By revealing the human legs as the source of eaten flesh, McCarthy encourages a connection to the leg of flesh in the smokehouse. When removed for the human body, the severed legs of the humans take on the same visible indistinction as the lump of leg flesh in the smokehouse. They, too, become another piece of flesh ready to be consumed by a hungry human. Therefore, while McCarthy initially obscures the smokehouse “ham’s” identity, he does reveal the origin of another lump of leg flesh—the human in the cellar—in order to determine the “ham’s” speculative origin: human.

With these troubling moments of indistinct flesh, McCarthy not only implicates the man and the boy in cannibalised consumption, but he also lays the foundations for more horrifying cannibalised consumptions further down the road. Stephen Joyce suggests,

with human beings now turned into livestock and eaten piece by piece while still alive to keep the meat fresh, it seems there is no more depravity that McCarthy can throw at us, but there are always new depths to plumb.[[131]](#footnote-131)

Such uncomfortable, new depths are exemplified in further moments of cannibalised consumption, when the man and the boy observe “three men and a woman. The woman walked with a waddling gait and as she approached he could see that she was pregnant.”[[132]](#footnote-132) However, while such moments of human flesh consumption are, indeed, depraved, they open up new ways of thinking about flesh, both human and animal, encouraging us to use depravity to navigate indistinction. This pregnant woman, accompanied by two men, carries inside of her the first new life that the man and the boy have encountered—a baby kept safe inside a belly. However, in the world of *The Road*, McCarthy suggests that, upon entering this world, any new life is reduced to its material components, becoming a piece of consumable flesh:

They left their food cooking. […] They walked into the little clearing, the boy clutching his hand. They’d taken everything with them except whatever black thing was skewered over the coals. He was standing there checking the perimeter when the boy turned and buried his face against him. He looked quickly to see what has happened. What is it? He said. What is it? The boy shook his head. Oh Papa, he said. He turned and looked again. What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. He bent and picked the boy up and started for the road with him, holding him close. I’m sorry, he whispered. I’m sorry.[[133]](#footnote-133)

As the baby is ripped from one belly to feed another, McCarthy conjures these animal images alongside cannibalised identifiers: the image of the suckling pig, rotating on a fiery spit, accompanies the infant’s cooking flesh. Charring on the spit, this baby is no longer a hungry mouth to feed; instead, the baby has become a piece of edible flesh, cooked to feed three hungry mouths. Like the mutilated man in the cannibal house cellar, the baby has been reduced to flesh to be severed, charred, and consumed by other humans. This process of becoming flesh, which lingers over the bodies of every being in *The Road*, begins as soon as the first breath of contaminated air is taken, persisting until every last morsel of flesh has been consumed.

In these moments of flesh consumption, flesh becomes indistinct. Whether through antiquated equipment and animal remnants or through the current reality of cooking humans, they all become indistinct flesh for consumption. However, unlike the indistinction of the smokehouse flesh, which is achieved through a visually ambiguous “hammy” leg and caught between both human and animal identifiers, this flesh is explicitly identifiable. While the head of the infant has been removed before cooking, complicating the flesh’s source, its identity remains explicit. As with the human source of flesh in the cannibals’ basement, where a piece of leg flesh was removed, but the rest of the body remained, there are still enough identifiable human parts to make the man and the boy recoil in horror, rather than slaver in delight. Therefore, unlike the smokehouse flesh, the charred flesh of the baby is not indistinct in the same ambiguously visual way. Instead, the baby’s flesh exists in this zone of indistinction, precisely because it is caught between these human and animal identifiers, while also exposing the shared vulnerability of all flesh. This embodied vulnerability is key in moving towards indistinction, since, as Calarco states,

Making room for other possibilities for animals does not mean removing them and ourselves from the realm of predation and being meat; rather, it is an attempt to immerse ourselves ever deeper into that shared zone of embodied, vulnerable, exposed potentiality and to see what else we and they might become.[[134]](#footnote-134)

The extreme vulnerability of the infant’s flesh opens up these indistinct possibilities, where flesh is both edible and more than edible. Horrified by this spectacle of edibility, the man still clings to the ideology of distinction, allowing the ideology to guide his navigation of spaces and understanding of situations.

Upon surveying the encampment and cooking equipment, the man sees without *seeing*—“all the things he saw and did not see”[[135]](#footnote-135)—dismissing the identity of the cooked flesh of a human infant as “whatever black thing.” He actively turns his gaze away from the reality of the encounter, choosing to leave it to simmer in the background a little longer, in order to exist in this comfortable—yet fleetingly temporary—state of ignorance. Once again, the man does not consider the danger of denying the reality of cooked human flesh, allowing his son to discover the identity of the cooked flesh for himself. Calarco comments on this continued resistance, where “whatever degradations and sufferings our bodies might undergo, it is clear that most of us are not fundamentally prepared to accept that we might possibly be meat for others.”[[136]](#footnote-136) This resistance is embodied by the man who continues to consider human flesh as entirely inedible. By actively dismissing the cannibalised evidence in front of him, in favour of maintaining the ideology of distinction, the man proves that this ideological ignorance is not only misplaced but also dangerous.

Alongside troubling the man’s maintenance of the ideology of distinction, D Marcel Decoste comments that, in this moment of cooked infant flesh, “we see the essence of this hopeless world in its radical nullification of love in the interests of a survival that precludes not only humanity, but futurity.”[[137]](#footnote-137) Here, Decoste relies on what Lee Edelman calls “the pervasive invocation of the Child as the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value.”[[138]](#footnote-138) In this moment, then, with futurity’s embodiment—an infant—killed and cooked on a spit, futurity has been reduced to ash. The infant is a figure of both nulled futurity and edible flesh. However, this moment does not exist in isolation; instead, it links back to the smokehouse and the cannibal house, while simultaneously actualising the fears of the boy’s mother, at the beginning of the novel:

sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won’t face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I can’t. I can’t.[[139]](#footnote-139)

The pregnant woman, who gives birth to a suckling pig, is a futuristic vision of the mother’s fears over becoming a cannibalised production vessel. This moment is both a present experience and a haunting memory for the man, as he watches his dead wife’s fearful premonition come true. As such, unlike the man—whose view is shrouded, despite being surrounded by the manifold, explicit indicators of cannibalism—the woman *sees* the condition of this new world order not simply as an exercise in maintaining the ideology of distinction, but as a choice in how to exist within it: to continue in active ignorance or surrender to obsidian.

The man and the woman, then, in their differing yet intertwining ways, view this new environment, with all its absent children and hordes of cannibals, as Decoste’s nullification of futurity. However, the boy imagines a different possibility for the dead child that exists outside of the ideology of distinction:

If we had that little baby it could go with us.

Yes. It could.

Where did they find it?

He didn’t answer.

Could there be another one somewhere?

I don’t know. It’s possible.[[140]](#footnote-140)

The boy proposes an alternate future for the infant, imagining the infant becoming part of his family. He takes the horrifying and crafts a new, optimistic narrative alongside it. Initially, the boy’s speculations appear to be a response to this traumatic experience; however, they also begin to reveal the alternative ontological and ethical relations that the boy imagines. Despite all he has witnessed, he still speculates an alternative way of living for both himself and the charred infant. Through this imagined community, the boy transforms the spitted infant into more than edible flesh. In doing so, the boy holds two views about the infant simultaneously: they are both edible and more than edible. By holding these seeming oppositional views together, Calarco suggests that we begin to facilitate a zone of indistinction, since “inasmuch as we share embodiment with animals, we know that their bodies and our bodies can become something more, something beyond the “mere” meat to which the dominant culture tries to reduce them.”[[141]](#footnote-141) By imagining a new future for the infant, then, the boy not only imagines an alternative community, but he actively encourages the alternative ontological and ethical possibilities of indistinction, in opposition to the man’s ideological position of distinction. As Rick and Jonathan Elmore state, “the father’s logic, like his world and his worldview, appear in this new world to be utterly out of place.”[[142]](#footnote-142) It is the boy, with his imagined indistinct community that captures McCarthy’s vision of a post-apocalyptic future; it is a future without the father’s worldview, without his ideology of distinction. Like the boy, then, we can begin to see how both humans and animals can be part of an indistinct community, through their ability to be both edible flesh and more than edible flesh simultaneously.

These indistinct speculations continue throughout the narrative, with the boy continuously imploring his father to welcome other beings into their family. At first, it seems that only other humans are potential community candidates; however, when McCarthy introduces animals into the narrative, we begin to see how far the boy’s imagining of community extends. In the next section, I consider the character of the dog, who is both a potential source of food and a part of the community. The dog’s introduction develops the boy’s building of community, since there are key decisions that must be made, in order to make the dog’s community membership viable. This community, made possible by the alternative ontological and ethical possibilities of indistinction, is captured best, when the priorities, lives, and flesh of humans and animals intertwine and coexist.

## **The Dog Could Catch Something to Eat**

We are led to believe that the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road* is inhabited solely by humans, with animals existing only as remembered remnants and preserved flesh inside tins of pork and beans.[[143]](#footnote-143) In this space of animal absence, there are limits to the man’s repeated enactments of the ideology of distinction, since he can no longer repeatedly exist away from cannibalism or sustain himself and his son on the flesh of animals. The flesh they consume is either troubled by cannibalised identifiers or exists as echoes of animal lives, with each complicating the man’s maintenance of the ideology of distinction. Without animals, it becomes harder to make distinctions between flesh, offering up these moments of cannibalised indistinction on a plate for the man to turn away from in abject disgust. Perhaps, it would be simpler if McCarthy maintained the absence of animals from *The Road*, then, since cannibalised flesh—real or symbolic—would remain the sole source of indistinction. However, McCarthy injects animal life into *The Road*, in both memories and questionable mirages, facilitating human-animal interactions, alongside further questions of edible flesh and cannibalised consumption, in order to further comment on the experience of living within an ideology of distinction.

Presented with these human-animal interactions, we begin to see the possibility of a shift from the ideology of distinction, which values self-preservation, towards a zone of indistinction, which values community. Paul D. Knox has suggested that “discerning the link *The Road* presents between community and survival requires first recognizing that the man and the boy frequently affirm their shared ideology;”[[144]](#footnote-144) however, I argue that it is clear that the man and the boy do not share the same ideology—especially, concerning flesh and its impacts on the discourse of self-preservation versus community. Unlike the man, the boy has not yet been fully interpellated into the ideology of distinction. Althusser defines ideological interpellation as the way that ideology “‘recruits’ subjects [. . .] which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’”[[145]](#footnote-145) In the speculative world of *The Road*, the boy is able to delay his interpellation into the ideology of distinction, since the remnants of the ideology are not widespread enough to hail him into being. Existing on the fringes of the ideology of distinction allows the boy to imagine alternative ontological and ethical possibilities, ones which rely on indistinction as a route to a radical community of universal consideration.

Despite the apparent lack of animals, the man and the boy repeatedly encounter the echoes of a dog. While walking through a town, “in the distance he heard a dog bark.”[[146]](#footnote-146) This fleeting dog bark signifies a living remnant of an animal, rather than a dead one, calling for us to rethink our understanding of the supposed animal absence of the post-apocalypse. Even without seeing the dog, the sound of the animal is enough to spark the boy’s curiosity: “where did it come from?”[[147]](#footnote-147) he asks. The introduction of animal life offers a stark contrast to animals’ purported absence and the presence of cannibals, offering a beacon of life among the dark towns and figures of death. What may initially appear as a hopeful indicator of futurity, however, quickly becomes a point of fear for the boy. Unsure of the parameters of his father’s ideology of distinction, the boy is worried about the dog’s fate, seeking reassurance that “we’re not going to kill it, are we Papa?”[[148]](#footnote-148) While the boy understands that the ideology of distinction prohibits them from killing and eating humans, the application of this same ideology towards animals is never explicitly stated by the man—they can eat them in tins, but would they kill for it? The boy points towards the possibility of killing the dog, since, in his understanding, there is *always* the possibility that the dog—another being on the road—will be killed and eaten, either by the man and the boy or by other humans. However, the boy’s choice of “we” as the pronoun in his question hints at the acceptance that they could be the ones to kill the dog; the boy believes that, to his father, the dog is both a threat and a potential meal. The boy accepts equal responsibility for his father’s speculative violence, noting his presence as complicity. Therefore, the boy’s fearful question, whereby he acknowledges both the fundamental edibility of the dog and his resistance towards such an act of violence, encapsulates his resistance to becoming fully interpellated into the ideology of distinction.

As they leave the town, the man notices glimmers of light emerging from derelict buildings, where he assumes humans must be living. His first thoughts are of survival: “the higher floors of the buildings were dark. You’d have to carry up water. You could be smoked out. What were they eating? God knows.”[[149]](#footnote-149) As he lingers on the question of food, McCarthy reaches for the conclusion of cannibalism. After all, the man and the boy find nothing for themselves to eat, after scouring the town. With human flesh being the only viable food option in the town, we assume that is what they were eating, even if the man chooses not to think about it. However, McCarthy, once again, interweaves signs of cannibalism alongside the remnants of animals; the remnant, in this case, is the dog’s bark. Moments after considering the humans’ meal, the narrator informs us that “they never heard the dog again.”[[150]](#footnote-150) Rather than placing cannibalised identifiers after the consumption of animal flesh, this time, McCarthy introduces them before the speculation of animal flesh consumption. By placing this reveal immediately following the supposed cannibalised possibilities of consumption, McCarthy reinforces the boy’s fear: the dog is being eaten. What was previously a beacon of life among the death and darkness of the road becomes another reminder that all flesh is fundamentally edible; in this man eat dog world, if you do not eat them, someone else will.

Along with the echoes of the dog, the boy claims to have glimpsed a little boy in the town. However, the man does not see the other little boy and dismisses the boy’s insistence on his existence. Unlike the dog’s bark, there are no solid traces of the other little boy’s life; however, even if there were, the man would likely miss them. The boy clings to his vision of the other boy, encouraging us, as readers, to believe him over his father. He is captivated in both excitement and fear, imagining what it would be like to welcome the other little boy as one of the “good guys”:

The boy was pulling at his coat. Papa, he said.

What?

I’m afraid for that little boy.

I know. But he’ll be alright.

We should go get him, Papa. We could get him and take him with us. We could take him and we could take the dog. The dog could catch something to eat.

We cant.

And I’d give that little boy half my food.

Stop it. We cant.

He was crying again. What about the little boy? He sobbed. What about the little boy?[[151]](#footnote-151)

Just like the charred infant on the spit, the boy imagines a different future for the little boy and the dog. He pleads with his father, sharing both his fears with the father and his theoretical food with the other little boy; in so doing, he offers the man both emotional reasons and practical solutions for taking the boy and the dog. As readers, we, too, may rationalise these emotional and practical responses, willing the father to save another little boy and a dog, while also being acutely aware of the dangers this may cause. The man, however, refuses to agree with the boy, repeating “we cant,” as a way to add an impossibility to the imaginative possibility that the boy creates. The man’s resistance stems from his unwillingness to incorporate others into the boy’s imagined community out of fear of the potential practical outcomes—more mouths to feed and the threat of cannibalism—and, crucially, for a distrust to those who are not his own flesh and blood, those who are not human, those who are distinct.

Rick and Jonathan Elmore suggest that “standing out in sharp relief against his father’s ethics, the boy’s moral comportment emerges in their various encounters with other human beings throughout the novel.”[[152]](#footnote-152) However, the boy’s inclusion of the dog in his imagined possibility suggests that his “moral comportment” or desire for community is not restricted to his interactions with humans, but it includes animals, too. This community, made of humans and animals, is a form of universal consideration, whereby all beings are included and become indistinct from one another. While the man continues to fear for himself and the boy, if they were to welcome these outsiders into their community, the boy fears for the little boy and the dog—the mere thought of abandoning them is distressing. Like his father, the boy acknowledges the realities of their fragile situation: starvation or cannibalisation could be right around the corner. However, he sees these threats as more pertinent to the little boy and the dog, rather than himself and his father. For the boy, leaving them alone, without their community, is the same as killing them.

The man continues to see the boy’s imagined community as the naïve and whimsical pursuit of a child; yet, the boy continues to set out further practical qualifiers for his community. As well as being formed of both humans and animals, the boy’s community would share their resources, including the scarcely available resource of food. Before the man interrupts him, the boy is midway through a sentence, where he is explaining the logistical pathway for his community’s existence: “The dog could catch something to eat […] And I’d give that little boy half my food.”[[153]](#footnote-153) Crucially, the boy does not suggest that the man should share his food. He understands that this is a possibility that stretches beyond the realms of their reality, since the man has shown, time and time again, that he lives to protect himself and the boy. For the additional human in his community, the other little boy, the boy suggests sharing his food; however, for the nonhuman, the dog, the boy suggests a kind of self-sufficiency, whereby the dog would catch their own food.

In this moment of “dog catching food,” McCarthy conjures up two possibilities: the dog catches food to feed themself, in an attempt at self-sufficiency, or the dog catches food to feed themself *and* the humans, in the form of an animal asset. Since the boy imagines that the dog could “catch something,” whether for themself or the humans, there is an implicit understanding that the “something” being “caught” must be an animal or a human. As such, both of these possibilities rely on either the presumed existence of other animals populating *The Road*, or the dog consuming humans. Perhaps, the man’s thoughts of existing cows could provide a solution to the dog’s food problem: “There could be a cow somewhere being fed and cared for. Could there? Fed what? Saved for what?”[[154]](#footnote-154) The two possibilities, both of which are ambiguously plausible, align with the two differing perspectives of the man and the boy: the ideology of distinction and the alternative ontological and ethical possibilities of indistinction. On the one hand, the idea that the dog could catch flesh—which, in this instance, *must* be animal—to feed the humans, aligns itself to the anthropocentrism of the ideology of distinction, since the dog’s actions prioritise human life and make humans the central point of reference in the dog’s life. Whereas, if the dog were to catch flesh for themself, they would be exerting their energy for their own benefit, and the reward of flesh would directly benefit the animal who caught it. These two ambiguous possibilities, with their differing moral implications, then, capture the boy’s desire to include the dog in his community, using whatever means necessary to convince the man of their usefulness. Since these two positions remain ambiguous, McCarthy, once again, utilises indistinct phrasing to complicate potential moments of flesh consumption, asking the reader to consider whether the dog is an agent of their own volition, or a tool intended to be used by humans.

Alongside the ambiguity of who the dog’s fleshy catch may feed, McCarthy also uses the indistinction of the boy’s phrasing to further implore the man to accept the dog into their community; in either eventuality, the dog will not rely on the man for food. The boy introduces the possibility of the dog “catching” food, to prevent the man from seeing the dog as another hungry mouth to feed. If the dog is able to catch their own food, then they do not pose the same threat to the man, since he would not be required to find and share extra food with them; instead, he may even benefit and reap some fleshy rewards. The dog would become a companion—an equal member of the community—rather than competition for scarce resources. Phillip Armstrong discusses this fine line between the companion animal, who has agency, and the competition animal, who has ferity, in his discussion of the animals that populate the story of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719): “But once the animal becomes a pest—once it joins the category of those species competing with humans for resources, or threatening damage to human agricultural or domestic spatial arrangements—agency is reconfigured as ferity.”[[155]](#footnote-155) As such, if the boy was to posit sharing his food with both the other little boy *and* the dog, then the dog would become an animal threat. Therefore, the boy imbues the dog with agency, rather than ferity, convincing the man that the dog would be self-sufficient—even an asset—and feed themself on flesh that the man and the boy would never be able to “catch.”

Despite the boy’s attempts to persuade the man to allow the dog and the other little boy into a new community, however, the man still insists that “we can’t.”[[156]](#footnote-156) The man dismisses the boy’s pleas, referring to a memory, in order to rationalise his decision:

The dog that he remembers followed us for two days. I tried to coax it to come but it would not. I made a noose of wire to catch it. There were three cartridges in the pistol. None to spare. She walked away down the road. The boy looked after her and then he looked at me and then he looked at the dog and he began to cry and to beg for the dog’s life and I promised I would not hurt the dog, a trellis of a dog with the hide stretched over it. The next day it was gone. That is the dog he remembers. He doesn’t remember any little boys.[[157]](#footnote-157)

In this peculiar moment of shifting narrative voice, we no longer have the voice of the omniscient narrator but the voice of the man, instead. Christopher White suggests that the “sustained, close third-person narration that mingles at times with snatches of direct first-person narration is responsible for generating much of the novel’s affective power,” allowing readers to gain “the sense of what it would feel like to have the experiences that the man [. . .] undergoes in the course of the novel.”[[158]](#footnote-158) Indeed, in this moment, readers are permitted to see the road, through the man’s eyes, teasing out his decisions and reactions, to both make sense of and bear the weight of these choices. However, rather than singularly facilitating vicarious experiences, the mingled voices also reveal troubling moments of flesh consumption, whether hungry intentions are acted upon or not.

The man’s memory plays out in an unsettling and strikingly similar fashion to their present situation, with the man and the boy encountering a dog on the road. However, unlike the present dog, this remembered dog, the man insists, was physically encountered, rather than inferred from traces and noises. Much like the boy, the man attempts to “coax” this dog towards them; however, the “noose of wire” and consideration of the cartridges, with “none to spare,” suggests a more sinister approach than welcoming this dog into their community. Instead, murderous and hungry intent lies behind his noose and gun, as he figures out how to “catch” something to eat. The dog no longer straddles the line between companion and competition, agency and ferity; instead, they have become edible—just another fleshy body on the road that the man desires to consume. Rather than creating an indistinct possibility, by coaxing the dog, like the boy does, the coaxing, here, works to re-establish the man’s ideology of distinction. For him, this animal, despite being decidedly un-fleshy as “a trellis of a dog,” has the potential to satisfy his hunger.

Like in the town, the boy pleads with the man not to kill the dog, fully aware that this was the man’s initial plan. As he cries and begs for the dog’s life, the man combines the two moments into one experience, suggesting that the boy is simply re-living a memory and the other little boy in the town is “the dog he remembers.” The man does not deny the existence of the present dog, since he, too, hears the dog’s bark; however, he never sees or hears the other little boy, convincing himself that the boy recreated this memory. Despite these assertions in the man’s first-person narration, McCarthy troubles our perceptions of narratorial perspective, encouraging us to use narratorial indistinction to trouble moments of flesh consumption. At first, it appears that this entire section is spoken by the man, but there is a subtle shift in the last two lines, where the indistinction of narrative voice becomes apparent: “That is the dog *he* remembers. *He* doesn’t remember any little boys” [my emphasis].[[159]](#footnote-159) If we consider these lines in the man’s first person, the “he,” here, would refer to the boy, in the present, with the boy confusing the little boy he saw in the town with the dog from this memory. However, considering this shift in narrative voice, back to the third person narrator, reveals that it is the man who is the “he,” the man who has actively forgotten: the man remembers a dog and does not remember any little boys.

McCarthy exposes the man’s process of actively forgetting, through this moment of narratorial indistinction. Just like the instances of fleshy cannibalised remains, the man attempts to forget the realities of what he has seen, choosing, instead, to turn his head away in denial. If we accept the man’s first-person account of the disappearing dog, we are all part of this misremembering, coerced into the belief that there never was another little boy and the dog simply disappeared. As such, readers must rely on McCarthy’s indistinct narratorial techniques to reveal the repressed reality: there was a dog *and* another little boy. The man actively forgets because his thoughts about the little boy disturb his maintenance of the ideology of distinction. He sees both the dog and the other little boy as potential food, edible flesh to feed a hungry family. For the man, both in the present and in the memory, acknowledging the dog’s edibility is palpable, but acknowledging the other little boy’s edibility is something he would rather forget.

Alongside this narratorial indistinction, it is also important to consider the similarities between the content of the two scenes, in order to understand what happened to the dog and the other little boy. Like the woman’s premonition of the charred infant, the gambreled flesh in the barn and smokehouse, and the used cooking pot in the cannibal garden, these two scenes, when looked at together, reveal details about one another, details that the man would rather actively forget. While the man relies on this mirroring to justify his actions in the present, it actually reveals his active forgetting, instead. In the present moment, while the boy rationalises the dog’s value, he never cries and begs for the dog’s life; instead, it is the other little boy’s life that he cries for and begs to be saved. As such, the man’s insistence that the boy “began to cry and to beg for the dog’s life,” in the memory, suggests that the boy was, once again, begging the man to save the other little boy. Therefore, the man is not wrong in connecting the memory with the present moment, since the narrative plays out in strikingly mirrored fashion; he is simply wrong about the subject of the boy’s cries.

As the boy pleads with his father to let both these past and present boys and dogs enter into their community, we are, once again, made aware of the danger and insufficiency of the ideology of distinction in these new world conditions. While the man would rather actively forget the realities of this post-apocalyptic world, the boy wanders through it fully aware of both the realities and potentialities of taking up and practicing indistinction. Unlike the man, the boy is not beholden to the ideology of distinction, actively imagining alternative ontological and ethical relations with other beings—both human and animal. Through *The Road*’s cannibalised speculative flesh ecology and the boy’s alternative community building, we bear witness to the dismantling of the ideology of distinction and the production of alternative ontological and ethical relations in the form of indistinction. In this speculative flesh ecology, we are both potential meat for cannibals and potentially more than meat, in the boy’s indistinct community.

It has been suggested by Xavier Aldana Reyes that McCarthy’s *The* Road offers “a wholesale condemnation of the practice of cannibalism;”[[160]](#footnote-160) however, I have argued that such a suggestion offers an oversimplified view of how McCarthy explores the consumption of flesh in the novel. Instead of being a simple condemnation, McCarthy utilises the taboo of cannibalism to explore the workings of an ideology of distinction and provide challenges to it. As such, by revisiting repurposed structures, tools, and visibly indistinct flesh, alongside the discovery of human flesh consumption, McCarthy not only complicates the fleshy identity of the “ham” that the man and the boy gladly consume, but he also complicates the man’s maintenance of an ideology of distinction, whereby human flesh is inedible. He demonstrates both the ineffectiveness of such an ideology and the danger of it; since maintaining that human flesh is inedible, places the man and the boy in danger. However, the horror of consuming human flesh is never fully realised, for the man and the boy, since the ham’s identity is never confirmed, they never witness the consumption of the cooked infant, and they are never eaten, yet the cannibalised hints that McCarthy litters, throughout this ashy wasteland, actualise, if only in part, the horror for the reader. It is the readership’s horror that is, all at once, actualised *and* transformed; what appears to be a nightmare of edible becoming and consuming is actually McCarthy’s offer of transformation into alternative ontological and ethical possibilities: indistinction. The very fact that the man and boy inhabit a world, where human flesh is eaten, and that they have most likely partaken in this fleshy feast, forces human flesh to become edible, much to the horror of the ideology of distinction. They are thrown into what Matthew Calarco calls “a zone of indistinction,” where

To see oneself as potentially edible […] is to find oneself in a surprising, shocking alignment with animals; and to affirm and to live within the space of that alignment is ultimately to refuse the dominant culture’s way of creating a sharp split between human and animal.[[161]](#footnote-161)

Indistinction, then, is offered as an alternative ontological and ethical possibility; the debased world of human flesh consumption, potentially, offers up a new way of life, where both humans and animals exist “beyond the “mere” meat to which the dominant culture tries to reduce them.”[[162]](#footnote-162)

## **I Am Meat**

Joseph D’Lacey begins his novel, *Meat*, with an implicitly vegan quote from The Bible’s Book of Genesis: “Behold I have given you every herb bearing seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. Genesis 1:29.”[[163]](#footnote-163) In doing so, D’Lacey not only outlines the vegan ideal of Eden,[[164]](#footnote-164) but he also lulls the reader into a false sense of security; after reading this passage, you might not expect to find detailed descriptions of flesh consumption engulfing the pages of D’Lacey’s novel. Like *The Road*, however, we are served—in a more violent and horrifyingly explicit way—the haunting spectre of cannibalism, which threatens to pick off each inhabitant of Abyrne, one by one, until only the bones of the town remain.

There is one group of Abyrne’s residents that are selected for consumption, even before they let out their first scream in the world: The Chosen. The Chosen are humans and D’Lacey scatters explicit evidence of this human identity throughout the novel; yet, “they were so much like animals the Townsfolk had forgotten what the Chosen were. Forgotten, or put it out of their minds.”[[165]](#footnote-165) Unlike the Townsfolk, then, the Chosen are farmed for their human flesh and kept in conditions similar to those of farmed animals. In order for Abyrne’s leaders, Rory Magnus and The Welfare, to maintain the distinctions between the Chosen and the Townsfolk, which keep the Chosen eaten and the majority of the Townsfolk fed, they adapt an ideology of distinction, manufacturing distinctions by human-made mutilations and asserting that eating “meat gave you status; it meant that you weren’t meat yourself.”[[166]](#footnote-166) This residual but adapted ideology of distinction filters down, through newly created religious materials and capitalist advertisement, like the Gut Psalter and the Book of Giving. While the Book of Giving tells of how “the Father sent his own children down to Earth so that we, his Townsfolk, might eat,” [[167]](#footnote-167) the Gut Psalter explains in fine details the mutilations that the Chosen must undergo, at birth, in order to *become* edible flesh. From the removal of hair to the slashing of vocal cords, the Chosen are stripped of any visual and audible similarities that might connect them with the Townsfolk; these mutilations are similar to those that animals undergo, in the factory farming process. Despite the obvious human species identity of the Chosen, then, *Meat* acts as an ideological allegory, placing mutilated humans in the conditions and positions typically reserved for farmed animals. The Chosen, like the animals they allegorise, exist in Abyrne as what Rebekah Sinclair calls “speciesed others” who are “always already edible, killable even before they are killed.”[[168]](#footnote-168)

While the Chosen undergo the mutilation rituals soon after birth, marking their distinction from the Townsfolk, these same rituals are also infrequently performed on Townsfolk who break the rules. Known euphemistically as “revoking status,” the mutilation rituals signal a transformation of edibility: “when you cease to be ‘Townsfolk’ you *became* meat [my emphasis].”[[169]](#footnote-169) Therefore, the mutilation rituals act as repeated enactments of Abyrne’s adapted ideology of distinction, where being mutilated means *becoming* edible. After raping a Chosen dairy cow, WHITE-047, Greville Snipe (MMP’s head dairyman) is sentenced by Magnus to become meat. The price to pay for causing “damage to, and disrespect for, [Magnus’] property,”[[170]](#footnote-170) is flesh. As Magnus sentences Snipe to becoming meat, he asks his assistant to “arrange for Snipe’s introduction to the herd [. . .] I want nothing but sausage to remain by this evening.”[[171]](#footnote-171) Far from a gentle debut, Snipe’s introduction includes the chemical removal of hair, the slashing of vocal cords, castration, and the removal of teeth and digits. In horrifyingly visceral details, D’Lacey guides us through these mutilation rituals, step-by-step, welcoming us to MMP’s open slaughterhouse—here it is not so easy to leave. Through Snipe’s speculative remains, Magnus makes clear that these mutilations will wholly transform Snipe, both in status and in flesh; he will take on a new form, becoming the purposefully visually ambiguous sausage. As Snipe’s flesh is pumped into tubular casings of skin and intestine, his mutilations will render him entirely reshaped.

After his mutilation rituals, Snipe is ready for his “introduction to the herd,” where he is led into one of the Chosen’s cattle pens, ready for slaughter. Despite Magnus’ assurance that Snipe will become “nothing but sausage,” the Chosen reject him, maintaining a distinction between themselves and Snipe. In this moment of fleshy becoming, the ideology of distinction becomes troubled; as Snipe finds out, he is neither Chosen nor Townsfolk, he is simply flesh:

It was full of the Chosen, milling and jostling very gently, almost caressing as they swirled among each other. *Cattle. Cows. How swiftly we are made the same*. Some of them saw him and stopped moving. Soon the entire herd was still [. . .] Their eyes took him in. Their noses testing the air he brought with him. Many of them shrank away [. . .] He limped on incomplete feet to be among them but they parted whenever he came near and turned their backs to him. Hundreds of smooth bodies, fatter than his and somehow more beautiful. They stayed away from him, would not let him touch them. He looked at his own body and then looked at theirs. They were larger, more whole-looking even with their amputations. They were serene [. . .] *Dear Father, I am not even worthy of cattle. They will not accept me as their own. What am I Lord? What have I become?* [. . .] they still parted, none of them allowing closeness. He was alone among the Chosen for he was not Chosen.[[172]](#footnote-172)

In an uncomfortable sentimentality, D’Lacey describes the Chosen in the crowd pen as an artistic entanglement of mutilated flesh. As they caress, swirl, and jostle gently, we are led to believe that, like Bacon’s flesh paintings, “there is both tremendous beauty and tremendous horror in meat.”[[173]](#footnote-173) D’Lacey allows us to dwell—if only momentarily—in this horrifying yet beautiful visage of flesh, where we are forced to confront edibility and the ideological distinctions that determine edible status. When Snipe enters the pen, he wrongly assumes that he, too, will be able to nestle among the Chosen, becoming part of this swirl of mutilated flesh. However, as they sense his presence—both visually, olfactorily, and auditorily—discomfort ripples throughout the Chosen’s newly stiffened flesh, and it becomes clear that Snipe is not, in fact, “made the same.” Instead, like Magnus before them, the Chosen revoke Snipe’s presupposed status, by denying him an “introduction to the herd,” acknowledging the recent mutilations that mark his flesh: he is neither Townsfolk nor Chosen.

With Snipe’s status in flux, the visceral repeated enactments of the mutilation rituals do not function in the way that Magnus leads us to believe. Instead, the mutilations are unstable and multifaceted, marking complex ontological relations between Townsfolk, Chosen, and Snipe. While the mutilations are inflicted at birth to mark the Chosen’s distinction from the Townsfolk, they also signal the Chosen’s indistinction from one another, captured by the wholeness of this swirling mass of mutilated flesh. Furthermore, as the Chosen’s scars cover old wounds and their amputated limbs move with ease, the Chosen are visibly distinct from the raw, limping, and incomplete Snipe, despite their seemingly shared mutilations; their healed flesh juxtaposes the still fresh and bleeding Snipe. Not only does Snipe not bear the shared and healed mutilations of the Chosen, but his raw mutilations bear the evidence of his crime against WHITE-047. Snipe’s mutilations, then, are not just a marker of edibility, like Magnus implies, but a brand of culpability, too. His rape of WHITE-047 is present in every oozing incision and cauterised stump; the visible and olfactory bindings signal to the Chosen that he is both distinct and guilty of violating their flesh with his own violent mutilations. As the Chosen react to this revelation in separation and silence, Snipe struggles to understand why these mutilations have not made him one of the Chosen, not made him worthy of cattle, and not made him accepted as one of their own—he still does not understand that he is simply flesh.

The Chosen are mutilated at birth and raised with the explicit knowledge that they are always edible, always flesh to feed the Townsfolk. In utterances of comfort in the crowd pen, they communicate this inherent knowledge to one another:

*May you hold your head up before the deft ones and welcome their shining points and blades. May your nightfall be complete before they take what you go to give. We who give, we who are certain to follow, salute you.*[[174]](#footnote-174)

As they wish for swift release from these shining points and blades, the Chosen capture the entrenched nature of becoming flesh. For them, these cuts and clips are not just individualised and ideologically created repeated enactments that revoke the status of criminal Townsfolk, like Snipe; instead, they signal the mutilations and edibility of every Chosen who has gone before them and those “who are certain to follow.” Their edibility flows from parent to child, growing, culminating, and rippling through the mass of swirling flesh in the crowd pen. Chosen, mutilated, fattened, and violated, the Chosen know that they have always been, first and foremost, flesh. Therefore, in the crowd pen, the Chosen affirm that they are not “made the same” as Snipe. Although Snipe has now, too, been mutilated and pushed into the crowd pen, he still resists his edibility, wishing to claim a new status as Chosen and momentarily shield himself from the violent reality of MMP’s slaughterhouse. In Snipe’s denial of his edibility, he speaks to Calarco’s claim that “whatever degradations and sufferings our bodies might undergo, it is clear that most of us are not fundamentally prepared to accept that we might possibly be meat for others.”[[175]](#footnote-175) While the Chosen’s edibility is carved into their flesh, healed over to seal their fate, and then reopened to harvest their flesh, Snipe’s mutilations remain fresh, whereby his acknowledgment of edibility—an edibility that exists outside of the ideological distinctions of Chosen and Townsfolk—is not yet fully realised.

Disturbed by his undetermined status, he prays to God, asking “what have I become?” As if in answer to his prayer, one of the Chosen bulls pushes Snipe towards the end of the crowd pen and into the rotating stunning alcove complete with bleeding floor. Instead of a gentle swirl of flesh, the Chosen become a pointed and determined path, using their bodies to force Snipe towards the alcove, where the bolt-gun awaits. It is in this sealed alcove, bolt-gun pressed to his head, where Snipe finally understands what he has become: “*I am meat.*”[[176]](#footnote-176) Mutilated, rejected, and wholly transformed, Snipe is forced to accept his edibility, finally recognising that he is “the thing, neither Chosen nor human.”[[177]](#footnote-177) These ideological categories no longer control his ontological perception, and he understands that his status is—and always has been—ideologically constructed through repeated enactments, either mutilation rituals or the consumption of flesh. D’Lacey establishes that Snipe’s status as Chosen, Townsfolk, or some*thing* altogether different is futile; they—Chosen, Townsfolk, and Snipe—are indistinct in their edibility, whereby, “we are, all of us, potentially meat.”[[178]](#footnote-178) Therefore, although the mutilation rituals start out as a maintenance of the ideology of distinction, through Snipe’s turbulent “introduction to the herd” and his confession—“*I am meat*”—they actually begin to dismantle the ideology, one mutilated piece at a time. Whether Chosen or Townsfolk, innocent or criminal, mutilated or unmutilated, consumed or consumer, everyone in Abyrne is edible, everyone is flesh.

Despite this disruption to the ideology of distinction, D’Lacey resists developing the ethical possibilities of indistinction, which emerge from this shared edibility, at this point in the novel. Like vocal cords and digits, the ethical possibilities of indistinct flesh are clipped, before they can be realised. Instead, we are left to watch the spectacle of Snipe’s pulsating flesh on the bleeding gambrel and dwell among the swirling mass of Chosen, awaiting the moment when this shared edibility produces ethical possibilities in *Meat*.

## **We’ve Made Meat for Everyone!**

In a rather disturbing interaction involving Hema and Harsha, the twin daughters of Richard Shanti (MMP’s best stunner turned Chosen rights activist), D’Lacey further troubles the repeated enactments of the mutilation rituals, illustrating how *Meat*’s ideology of distinction functions: the ideology is filtered down, through textual propaganda, into the minds of all the Townsfolk of Abyrne, and repeatedly enacted, through normalised actions. Hema and Harsha decide to hold a party for their toy guests, selecting carefully their meal for the evening. At first, their party appears to be like any other, with their mother, Maya, hoping to glimpse their imagined world “in which she could return to their simple innocence and in doing so briefly turn away from the realities of the town.”[[179]](#footnote-179) However, in their town of horrors, the toys gathered around the table are not awaiting tea; instead, they await flesh:

On each plate was a hollow portion of doll—an upper arm, a thigh, a calf, a foot, a hand. The torso had been cut into four slices like a small loaf. Hema and Harsha were ‘sharing’ them. It was the attention to detail that stunned Maya. The girls had prepared the doll before butchering her for their distinguished guests. They’d cut as much of her hair off as they could. Maya could see how they’d removed two thirds of each finger on her tiny hands and clipped her thumbs off altogether. On the platters where feet were served, she saw that the big toe had been severed. The shaven head lay to one side but in the top ‘slice’ of the torso, she saw the neck and the puncture wound in the centre of it where they’d silenced the doll before slaughter. ‘Hello, Mama,’ said Harsha. ‘Would you like to come to the party? We’ve made meat for everyone!’[[180]](#footnote-180)

In precise detail, Hema and Harsha carry out the mutilations to their toy doll, removing her hair and the required portions of finger, before slicing her body into strips of flesh. The childhood innocence, that Maya hopes to witness, vanishes under the ideological teachings of the Gut Psalter and the Book of Giving. Rather than existing outside of an ideology of distinction, where the production and consumption of the Chosen’s flesh does not figure in their understanding of Abyrne, Hema and Harsha are at the centre of ideological conditioning; an ideology of distinction is infiltrating even the youngest of minds. In an interview, D’Lacey confirms this rationale, commenting: “I wanted to imply that the children were beginning to pick up and accept Abyrne’s societal edicts as ‘normal’. A scene in which they played out a meal for their toys seemed a good way of doing that.”[[181]](#footnote-181) Hema and Harsha’s party, then, appears to be a form of repeated enactment—albeit an infantile one—whereby an ideology of distinction is reaffirmed and maintained.

The doll at the centre of their meal begins the party like any other of the toy guests, with a full head of hair and all her fingers intact; she is even accompanied by “the blind, balding bear, the toy soldiers, several dolls and even a rubber clown that smelled of chemicals—a toy they rarely played with.”[[182]](#footnote-182) Gathered around the makeshift table, then, are a number of toys which Hema and Harsha could have “chosen;” there are even other dolls. There appears to be no rationale behind “picking out a plastic female doll with long blond hair;”[[183]](#footnote-183) but she becomes their meal. This strange moment, where the parameters between the edible and the inedible fluctuate, signals a displacement of the ideology of distinction. Despite the repeated enactment of imagined consumption seemingly functioning as a maintenance of an ideology of distinction, Hema and Harsha’s party has another function: the party provides a space for challenging the very ideology that they are enacting.

When their mother sees what they are doing, the girls proudly announce, “we’ve made meat for everyone.”[[184]](#footnote-184) Recalling Snipe’s earlier transformation, the girls understand—in part—that they must *make* meat; there is a *becoming,* before the consuming. In order for the doll to form a suitable meal for their distinguished guests, she must undergo a process of edible fleshy *becoming*. However, it is not just the mutilations and butchering of the doll’s plastic flesh that constitutes this edible fleshy becoming; instead, after these physical enactments, there is an ideological becoming, whereby the doll stops being an inedible consumer and *becomes* an edible commodity. The doll makes the swift transition, from inedible toy—like the soldiers, clown, and other dolls—into delectable, plastic portions of edible foot, arm, and torso. By acknowledging this *becoming*, the girls’ party exposes the workings of an ideology of distinction, demonstrating that the ideology can only survive, through repeated enactments; the distinctions of edibility are illusions created by an ideology of distinction.

Maya comments that this was “the second time she’d found the girls serving ‘meat’ to their toys and she wanted it to stop.”[[185]](#footnote-185) Aside from being an exclusive game for the girls to play, then, there are suggestions that the girls have tried this before. The chemical smell that emerges from the clown, rather than simply being an identifier of its condition, alludes to a previous attempt at performing the mutilation rituals. The girls allow the toys with “failed” mutilations to re-enter the world of the inedible; they go through a process of *un-becoming*, where they are “more than ‘mere’ meat,”[[186]](#footnote-186) no longer existing solely to be consumed.

This *un-becoming* is not confined to the realms of imagined play; instead, it takes centre stage, at the battle to free the Chosen. It is revealed that both Richard Shanti and John Collins (the leader of the Chosen rights movement) bear the scars of failed mutilations:

Collins bore a scar at his throat. Shanti was missing one thumb. Arnold Shanti had committed a crime of interference, a crime so grave it could never be acknowledged. He’d liberated twin male calves. He’d raised one as his own but both had grown up as Townsfolk, neither knowing the other existed. ‘Brothers…’ she whispered to John Collins. ‘… Chosen.’ She gave herself to the nothingness that came for her.[[187]](#footnote-187)

After a trail of indicators, throughout the novel, that there is something more to Shanti and Collins than Townsfolk, it is Parson Mary Simonson that finally connects the dots. Like the rubber clown, in Hema and Harsha’s party, Shanti and Collins were granted an existence away from their birth as edible Chosen, by a member of the Townsfolk. Arnold Shanti facilitates Shanti and Collins’ *un-becoming*, halting the mutilation rituals and moving them from the space of the slaughterhouse to the space of the town. Such an *un-becoming* shows the instability of the ideology of distinction and directly challenges it—they are both meat and “more than ‘mere’ meat.” [[188]](#footnote-188) If Richard Shanti and John Collins can exist within the town, even becoming, in Shanti’s case, an admired member of MMPs workforce, the inherent distinctions between the edible and the inedible, associated with an ideology of distinction, fall away. Therefore, with their Townsfolk status and Chosen mutilations, Collins and Shanti are not cleanly identifiable as either, seamlessly existing as both simultaneously. As such, any differences that exist between the Chosen and the Townsfolk are exposed as being fabricated.

In the final moments of the novel, these fabricated ideological distinctions are confirmed. The Chosen step into the light, revealing themselves, in their mutilated fleshy form, to Hema and Harsha:

There, for the first time, [Hema and Harsha] saw bulls and cows in the flesh, up close. There, too, they saw calves pressed close to their mothers. Some of the calves were the same size as the twins. Their eyes met. The twins saw the calves for what they truly were. Children.[[189]](#footnote-189)

Unlike the horror of the fleshy origin of the “ham,” in *The Road,* which is never fully actualised, the horrors of the Chosen’s fleshy identity are fully actualised for Hema and Harsha, who now understand the true identity of the flesh they have been playing with and consuming. Despite the Chosen’s mutilated flesh, Hema and Harsha see that they are like the Chosen, and the Chosen are like them; they recognise their own edibility and the more than edible potentialities of the Chosen. They see that the distinctions they have been taught, through the ideological conditioning of the Welfare’s scriptures, are human-made, serving as convenient justifications for the becoming and consumption of the Chosen. In the end, they are all the same flesh.

Indeed, the horror of consuming the Chosen’s human flesh is fully realised for every wilfully ignorant Townsfolk of Abyrne:

Most of them had never seen the Chosen alive and up close. The hairless bodies and stumpy fingers. The pale limbs. They stood like people. But for their damaged feet, they moved like people. A ripple of unease spread through the crowd. They began to retreat. Further back the crush caused others to fall over or be pushed into the ditches and hedges of blackthorn.[[190]](#footnote-190)

As they survey the Chosen’s mutilations, their earlier cries of “WE WANT MEAT!”[[191]](#footnote-191) are replaced by an urge to retreat away from Abyrne’s horrifying reality. The Chosen’s mutilations are fabrications, distinctions applied to flesh that was, and continues to be, indistinct from their own. However, the Townsfolk resist confronting their own edibility, holding tightly onto their status as not meat. Their “ripple of unease” in their own crowd pen is antithetical to the Chosen’s movements of “milling and jostling very gently”[[192]](#footnote-192) in MMP’s crowd pen; like Snipe, the Townsfolk have not yet acknowledged that “*I am meat*.” [[193]](#footnote-193) Furthermore, even as they are pushed by one another into hedges of blackthorn—a plant traditionally used as a barrier for farmed animal fields—they still cling to their status as Townsfolk, refusing to acknowledge the contact with this botanical border as a moment of symbolic edibility. Therefore, the Townsfolk, D’Lacey suggests, are still caught within the ideology of distinction, even as they are shown, confronted, and pushed into acknowledging their likeness to the Chosen. As they cling to the final remnants of the ideology of distinction and their Townsfolk status, Shanti is aware that if Abyrne continues to live on without the Chosen, the Townsfolk, too, will become meat: “without [Shanti] and Collins, without the followers, without the Chosen, they would never understand. [Shanti] was glad.”[[194]](#footnote-194)

Unlike the Townsfolk, there are those that embrace indistinction with cautious, but open, arms—the Chosen, Shanti, Collins, Hema, Harsha, and the followers—acknowledging their shared edibility and that inhabiting this zone of indistinction “means that we have ethical and ontological work to do.”[[195]](#footnote-195) D’Lacey captures this movement into a zone of indistinction, in the final moments of the novel, allowing the Chosen to walk free, alongside one another and Hema and Harsha, led by Shanti:

They only knew that they were free now and that with Shanti’s knowledge and the knowledge of the followers, they would survive until they reached the land where pain was no longer a memory, a land where what they had given would never be asked for again. They knew it existed.[[196]](#footnote-196)

Not only has the Chosen’s flesh been freed from the confines of MMP’s slaughterhouse walls, but they have been freed from an ideology of distinction, too. In this indistinct land that they long for, they will be free from the bonds of the ideology of distinction, no longer forced to relinquish their lives for the satiation of others. As they head towards this indistinct land, we wonder what it might look like to put indistinction into practice, to live as “more than ‘mere’ meat,”[[197]](#footnote-197) alongside the Chosen.

## **To Survive Without Causing Harm to Any Other Living Thing**

D’Lacey scatters the possibilities of putting indistinction into practice, throughout *Meat*, exploring the indistinct teachings of John Collins and the practice of speculative veganism. From lock-up lectures to speculative (non)consumptions, each of these moments use the ontological identity of flesh to inform the ethical possibilities that emerge from an indistinct approach. Such an indistinct approach does not involve ascending this shared edibility, this shared fleshiness; instead, as Calarco notes, “it is an attempt to immerse ourselves ever deeper into that shared zone of embodied, vulnerable, exposed potentiality and to see what else we and they might become.”[[198]](#footnote-198)

The path to Chosen emancipation was a movement long in the making, built underground, by the indistinct teachings of Prophet John Collins. Under the concealment of lock-ups and organised secrecy, Collins holds his meetings in the Derelict Quarter: “out there, there was nothing. Nothing to eat, no running water or sewers, no power lines. Just blocks and blocks of crumbling, abandoned buildings and heaps of rubble. The Derelict Quarter was as unforgiving as the wasteland.”[[199]](#footnote-199) In this desolate environment, devoid of life and light, John Collins teaches an alternative to the way of living to the ideologically conditioned Townsfolk. In a meeting, which Shanti attends, Collins encourages his guests to consider their relationship to one another:

‘In the flesh, as we sit here, as *people*,’ he would sometimes say, ‘we’ve all come from the same place, from the same beginning. That beginning is where we’re all going back to sooner or later. That makes us all brothers and sisters. All of us. No one exists outside that simple truth. Can you see that much?’[[200]](#footnote-200)

Collins asks his congregation to identify themselves as fleshy beings, who also inhabit the privileged position of Townsfolk. In Calarco’s terms, he asks them to identify that they are “simultaneously both meat and more than meat.”[[201]](#footnote-201) In order to gently introduce the concept of indistinction, Collins does not yet include the Chosen—explicitly, at least—in this understanding of simultaneous edibility and more than edibility, opting for the euphemistic term “people” to describe both Townsfolk and Chosen. He uses his congregation’s knowledge of their own fragile Townsfolk status, which can be revoked at any time, in order to allude to the Chosen’s identity. Furthermore, this “same beginning,” which Collins guides his followers towards, references both a religious beginning, a material beginning, and a time before the Welfare and MMP’s ideological control of Abyrne. Whether spiritually, materially, or ideologically, both Townsfolk and Chosen began and will return to this “same beginning,” where they will no longer consume flesh. Through his teachings, Collins gently guides the Townsfolk towards viewing indistinction as both an alternative ontological and ethical possibility and a site for a possible indistinct community. He imagines them as brothers and sisters, entangled by one another’s fleshiness in this possible zone of indistinction, where “all of us” are flesh, both edible and more than meat.

Successful in teaching his followers about their indistinction from the Chosen, through their shared edibility and more than edible potential, Collins proposes a way for them all to put indistinction into practice: “I live on God.”[[202]](#footnote-202) “Living on God,” which “looks like breathing and taking in light but really what I’m doing is eating God,” serves as a kind of speculative veganism—a veganism without sacrifice. This speculative veganism builds on Calarco’s proposition of veganism being “one of the ways of putting the notion of indistinction into practice.”[[203]](#footnote-203) *Meat*’s speculative veganism is both a self-sacrificing endeavour and, with the right guidance, an achievable practice; as Collins tells Magnus, “anyone, anyone at all, can do it. It’s so simple. It’s the reason I’m not afraid of you. The reason I’m not afraid to die.”[[204]](#footnote-204) Expressing his fearless approach towards death, Collins establishes his speculative veganism as a route to new potentialities that are not limited to an abstention from flesh consumption.

In line with indistinction, veganism opens up ontological and ethical potentials for all beings involved. As Calarco notes, veganism is not only a dietary choice, but it is also

an attempt to release animals into these additional potentials, into these other possibilities [. . .] veganism of this sort is not a hatred or disgust of meat or of embodiment, but a profound identification with and passion for meaty bodies and their wide range of potentials.[[205]](#footnote-205)

Both Calarco’s veganism and Collins’ speculative veganism, then, are both deeply rooted in a fleshy ontology, which acknowledges a shared edibility between humans and animals, and the ethical possibilities, which accompany the potential to be more than meat. In *Meat*, as the Chosen are freed from MMP, Collins’ speculative veganism releases them into additional potentials and other possibilities, whereby, “w*e who gave will give no longer*.”[[206]](#footnote-206) Therefore, through Calarco’s veganism, we can practice the indistinction of being flesh, of being both edible and more than edible; through Collins’ speculative veganism, we can extrapolate these additional potentials and possibilities, imagining what flesh might become.

After confronting the ideological fabrications of Abyrne and acknowledging his own edibility, Collins seeks out a way to practice his indistinction and extrapolate its possibilities, learning how to “live on God”—how to practice speculative veganism—from an old man living in the Derelict Quarter. As Collins recalls, this old man “discovered that refraining not only from eating meat, but from eating anything at all, changed the workings of his mind and gave him access to different levels of consciousness.”[[207]](#footnote-207) By releasing the Chosen from solely existing as flesh to be consumed, through practicing speculative veganism, the old man also releases himself into additional potentials; he has access to a new potentiality—a new level of consciousness. This speculative veganism, then, supports Calarco’s way of practicing indistinction, since “veganism of this sort is also an effort to release ourselves into other possibilities, potentials, and passions.”[[208]](#footnote-208) *Meat*’s speculative veganism, then, is a way of acknowledging and holding onto our shared edibility, in order to create and explore the ethical potentialities of indistinction.

Calarco recognises that, even though veganism proceeds from indistinction, it can still contribute to the suffering of animals. In other words, it still involves sacrificing flesh. A “pure veganism,” he notes “is impossible to attain – and I know that, despite my best efforts [. . .] I indirectly consume animals and cause them harm in innumerable ways. But that doesn’t mean one simply gives up and eats just anything one feels like.”[[209]](#footnote-209) Although this kind of veganism is practically impossible, D’Lacey offers speculative veganism as an extrapolation of veganism’s indistinct intentions, attempting to move us closer to “pure veganism,” while acknowledging its strictly speculative nature. Part veganism, part photosynthesis, “living on God,” entails drawing energy directly from the sun—as Collins believes, from God. This vital consumption means that not only do the old man, Collins, Shanti, and the followers not consume the flesh of the Chosen, but they also do not consume the flesh of any other beings either. As Collins recalls, the old man “realised that, in theory, cutting a vegetable and eating it was not so different from eating meat. Either way, you ended the life of the thing you wanted to devour.”[[210]](#footnote-210) This speculative veganism, therefore, does not only attempt to eradicate the harm to and consumption of animals—in this case, the Chosen—but it also begins to extend these ethical possibilities to other living beings, too. We join the old man in wondering, if, through speculative veganism, “there might be a way for folk to survive without causing harm to any other living thing.”[[211]](#footnote-211)

By practicing speculative veganism, the old man, Collins, Shanti, and the followers not only live without causing harm to any other living thing, but they also undergo a speculative transformation, both ideologically, ontologically, and ethically. This speculative transformation is, once again, an extrapolation of Calarco’s indistinct veganism, since, he suggests, “veganism of the sort I am talking about here needs to go well beyond a change in eating habits and must extend to a reflection on and radical transformation of everything.”[[212]](#footnote-212) Alongside the old man’s new levels of consciousness, as they feast on the light of God and liberate the Chosen from MMP, Collins, Shanti, and the followers also confirm their radical transformation into both meat and more than meat; they cling to their edibility, in order to radically transform into “something more, something beyond the “mere” meat to which the dominant culture tries to reduce them.”[[213]](#footnote-213) As he defies the Welfare, readying the Chosen for liberation, Shanti goes through what appears to be a final radical transformation, when the Grand Bishop revokes his status: “How dare you speak such blasphemies? I will see to it that your status is revoked forthwith. You, Richard Shanti, are no longer among the townsfolk. You have become meat.”[[214]](#footnote-214) The Grand Bishop attempts to violently transform Shanti, through the revocation of status and the mutilation rituals that ordinarily follow. However, as they stand outside MMP, liberated Chosen in tow, these declarations are exposed as redundantly superficial. In practicing indistinction through speculative veganism, Shanti has already revoked his own status, removed himself from the Townsfolk, “become meat,” and continued to acknowledge his shared edibility with the Chosen and the followers. Therefore, this speculative veganism, which proceeds from indistinction, has radically transformed Abyrne’s adapted ideology of distinction; it no longer carries the threat of consumption.

As status and mutilations are, once again, exposed as fabricated distinctions which repeatedly enact the ideology of distinction, we see, too, how the Chosen have been radically transformed by speculative veganism. Alongside their transformation to liberation, the Chosen, like the old man, who looks “with new eyes,”[[215]](#footnote-215) too, begin to look with new eyes into the “distant tomorrow.”[[216]](#footnote-216) Their previous stunted potentialities have been expanded, radically transforming them from singularly edible to manifoldly more than edible, where they have released themselves into additional potentialities. In a mirroring of their crowd pen prayer—"*On a far tomorrow we will see you with new eyes. We will see you in a land where pain is not even a memory, where what we go to give will not be asked for again*”[[217]](#footnote-217)—the Chosen evidence this moment of radical transformation, as they wait for Shanti to lead them away, communicating, “*we have seen the distant tomorrow. We have seen the land where pain is not even a memory. A land where what we gave will never be asked for again*.”[[218]](#footnote-218) As they shift from “we will see” to “we have seen,” immaterial comfort transforms into tangible action and possibility becomes certainty. Their mutilated flesh and hobbling recall their always present edibility, the histories and potentialities of their consumption; however, as they walk away, becoming radically transformed, they enter into additional potentialities, capturing what it might look like to become more than meat. In this indistinct land, the Chosen’s edibility will exist only as healed remnants, symbolising a horror that will never be repeated. Walking away from Abyrne, the Chosen and Shanti represent becoming more than meat; it is still speculative, still filled with other possibilities and additional potentialities, but we walk towards it, having seen the indistinct “land where pain is not even a memory.” [[219]](#footnote-219) Therefore, *Meat*’s speculative veganism enables the radical transformation necessary to practice the ontological and ethical work of indistinction. Both Calarco’s veganism and speculative veganism demonstrate that we need to “look with new eyes,” and to be “prepared to think about things differently.”[[220]](#footnote-220)

As in his response to *The Road*, Aldana Reyes narrows *Meat*’s priorities to the worry of humans being treated as flesh and what this means for their moral status: “*Meat*’s horrific premise is based on the possibility of humans being reduced to their flesh and on the subsequent loss of their rights as individuals.”[[221]](#footnote-221) Again, however, while this is, in part, true, what Reyes does not acknowledge, here, is the role of animals in the figuring of *Meat*’s horror. The horror of *Meat* is not simply a speculative imagining of human reduction; instead, the real horror of *Meat* is the exposition of an ideology of distinction, which perpetuates the very real consumption of animals. *Meat* shows us, in horrific detail, that the flesh of animals is being butchered and consumed every day because of fabricated ideological distinctions. From unassuming children’s parties to explicitly gruesome scenes of mutilation, D’Lacey posits that, behind the facades of repeated enactments, lies the real horror perpetuating the suffering and oppression of the Chosen and the animals they represent: an ideology of distinction. D’Lacey conflates the disturbing, speculative practice of human flesh consumption with the very real, disturbing consumption of animals, in order to negotiate the ideology of distinction that maintains the parameters of edibility. He forces us to question how human flesh *becomes* edible, in a speculative future, encouraging us to apply the same understanding to the edible *becoming* of animals. These explorations of *becoming* and *consuming* flesh, then, demonstrate both the prominence and power of an ideology of distinction, as well as its weaknesses and instability.

## **We Have Seen the Land Where Pain is Not Even a Memory**

Negotiations of human flesh’s edible *becoming* and *consuming*, in *The Road* and *Meat,* offer us more than just a grizzly spectacle of the extremes of flesh consumption; instead, they actively encourage explorations of alternative ontological and ethical possibilities, showcasing the practice of indistinction and the creation of communities. Human flesh consumption, through its acknowledgement of edibility, offers the possibility for humans to progress from this debased place of edibility, alongside other fleshy beings. As Calarco notes, “inasmuch as we share embodiment with animals, we know that their bodies and our bodies can become something more, something beyond the ‘mere’ meat to which the dominant culture tries to reduce them.”[[222]](#footnote-222) The alternative ontological and ethical possibilities of indistinction, explored by these awkward and strange moments of flesh consumption and becoming, demonstrate the instability of an ideology of distinction, both within the novels and outside of them. Although it appears that all that survives at the end of the world are humans and an ideology of distinction, both clinging to the fleshy vestiges of a bygone era, the novels work within an ideology of distinction to weaken the repeated enactments that maintain it, exposing the workings of the ideology and providing alternative ontological and ethical possibilities like indistinction. *The Road* and *Meat* offer us an insight into what it means to both eat *and* be flesh, in a world where everything is on the menu.

With their cannibalised speculative flesh ecologies and indistinct possibilities, my analysis of *The Road* and *Meat* encourages us to see ourselves on the back cover of Danish Crown’s magazine—we, like the speculative vegans of *Meat*, see the bisected pig of Danish Crown’s magazine with “new eyes.” By acknowledging that we, too, could be sliced down the middle, our own flesh pushing out from the skin of amputated arms, air filling the gaps where our organs once pulsated and life once lived, we inhabit this zone of indistinction, where humans and animals are both potentially edible and more-than-edible. If we take lead from *The Road* and *Meat*’s speculative flesh ecologies, we might *all*—human and animal—be able to leave the slaughterhouse, never forced to participate in ‘24 Hours at the World’s Most Modern Slaughterhouse’ again. In order to practice indistinction, as *The Road* and *Meat* begin to develop, we must leave the boundaries of ethical consideration open. When we draw hard and fast lines around what flesh is or who is edible, we risk redrawing the boundaries in further violent ways, creating new categories of edible and inedible flesh. Taking lead from *Meat*’s speculative veganism, then, my next chapter will grapple with the inherent need to consume, through an analysis of *Semiosis*’ plant flesh-filled speculative flesh ecology. My analyses of *Semiosis*’ flesh-eating vines and communicative bamboo demonstrate that we need to reconsider our relationship with and consumption of plants, while also acknowledging that the consumption of plants should not necessitate total instrumentalization. As we make our way into the speculative flesh ecology of *Semiosis*, we leave the boundaries of ethical consideration open, in the hope that we might see how we are *like plants*.

# “I Gave Them Fruit”: Plant Flesh and Grafts in Sue Burke’s *Semiosis* (2018)

## **Our Green Planet**

David Attenborough’s five-part BBC television series, *The Green Planet*, begins with an expositional shot of a sequoia forest in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, before panning down the trunk of “the biggest living thing that exists on this planet,” its body dwarfing Attenborough’s.[[223]](#footnote-223) He goes on to highlight the importance of plants, noting, “plants […] are the basis of all life, including ourselves.”[[224]](#footnote-224) Such a statement retrieves the often forgotten importance of the plants that cover, create, and sustain this green planet; all life is reliant on the successful growth and proliferation of plants. Despite this impartation of knowledge, however, it becomes clear, throughout the series, that human-plant relationships are experienced in violent ways. Punctuating mesmerising scenes of plant life and resilience are shots of flattened forests, depleting underwater meadows, water-starved sequoia trees, and diminishing saguaro cacti; their flesh decaying and disappearing under the enormous weight of humanity’s environmental footprint.

Each episode of *The Green Planet* follows a different plant filled environment. From the magical—and sometimes monstrous—tropical, water, seasonal, and desert worlds, to the ever-imposing human world, each of *The Green Planet*’s episodes provides an intimate insight into the surprising ways that plants live, experience, and grow together with their environments. *The Green Planet*’s triffid (a motion controlled, time-lapse camera) infuses plants with life—or, more accurately, expressions of life that humans can relate to. In the episode ‘Human Worlds,’ the triffid follows the seedlings of a wild oat plant; their two awns (long bristles) carrying them across the ground, as Attenborough announces, “they walk.”[[225]](#footnote-225) Their “walking” is actually a result of the awns twisting and untwisting, as they dry out and rehydrate; however, the suspenseful soundtrack and time-lapse camera work make it hard to see the seedlings’ movements as anything other than walking. Accompanying this human-relatable expression of life, however, is the uncanny feeling that plants are not supposed to walk—or even move—like humans and other animals. These uncanny and monstrous echoes are reified, throughout the series, where plants are captured as capable of more than we anticipated. In ‘Water Worlds,’ the triffid makes quick work of recalling the well-known monstrous plants of fiction; like a creature from the black lagoon, the giant water lily forces their way towards the surface, before wielding their bud to clear away the surrounding plants.[[226]](#footnote-226) Their leaf splays out across the water, with both their sunlight starving surfaces and spiny undersides creating a death trap for any underwater competitor. The lily engulfs each and every plant around, with an overhead shot capturing the sheer magnitude of the plant’s profusion. These uncanny presentations of plant life and movement, then, challenge our expectations of plants’ capabilities and their role in our shared ecology.

As well as uncanny expressions of life, *The Green Planet* also explores the mutual relationships between beings in their shared ecology. As the camera watches playful capuchin monkeys tossing leftover fruit seeds into the river for the hungry mouths of piraputangas, the symbiotic relationships between plants and animals become clear. Whether through sustenance or propagation, each being benefits from the existence, adaptations, and actions of the other. These plant-animal relationships explore what it means to live *together with* the environment,[[227]](#footnote-227) capturing the complex—and sometimes uncannily horrifying—ways plants live and express life, alongside the mutual realities and potentialities of plant-animal-human relationships.

After capturing the present lives, expressions, and relationships of plants, Attenborough begins to think speculatively about a future withplants; he states, “how [our relationship with plants] changes next will shape the future of our green planet.”[[228]](#footnote-228) Initially, Attenborough’s speculation appears to suggest an expansive universalism, where “our green planet” includes humans, animals, and plants. However, this approach is undercut by the humanist perspective that pervades the documentary’s form, with Attenborough’s employment of the third person “our” alluding more to human ownership than expansive universalism—“our green planet” does not belong to plants and animals. It becomes clear, therefore, that when it comes to thinking about “the future of our green planet,” our speculations should involve the lives, expressions, and relationships of *all* beings in order to truly think about “*our* green planet.” As such, we must ask, what other possibilities for “*our* green planet” exist? What other positive futures and relationships are possible between plants, humans, and animals? These questions are best answered and explored in speculative fiction, whose form is not solely caught in these ideas of human ownership; plant-animal-human relationships become the focal point for the future of “*our* green planet.”

These speculative plant-human-animal relationships are explored alongside the ever-changing perception of plant capabilities in Sue Burke’s novel, *Semiosis* (2018). *Semiosis’* Earth-like planet, Pax, is home to a plethora of diverse plants who quickly become aware of their new colonisers. Each chapter of the novel focuses on a human from generation one to seven, interspersed with narration from Pax’s resident rainbow bamboo, Stevland. While plant-animal-human relationships begin as a facsimile of those on Earth, they soon become complicated by the inhabitants of this uncanny green planet. From pernicious snow vines to fruitful rainbow bamboo, the planet sustains a plethora of plant life that forces both Pax’s human colonisers and *Semiosis*’ readers to rethink their preconceptions of plant life and relationships as they exist historically, presently, and speculatively.

*Semiosis* begins with the first generation of human colonisers, as they flee the ecological disasters on Earth and arrive on the planet, Pax, scoping out the environment and its inhabitants. Initially, Pax appears to be the ideal planet for this human colony; however, they soon discover that the planet’s plant and animal inhabitants possess capabilities that threaten to instrumentalize the humans. Many of the humans die, at the hands of both Pax’s environment and the plants; however, they still begin their population programme, growing and birthing the first generation of Pax humans. As they grow, this first generation are not satisfied with the simple and threatened existence that their parents have created on a small patch of Pax’s landscape; instead, they want to explore the rest of the planet and seek out the ruined glass city that the colonisers satellites captured, when they first arrived. Two of the first-generation humans make their way towards the glass city. On their return, they convince the rest of the colony—partly through violent means—to relocate to the glass city; only the young and able-bodied can make the journey. After arriving, they soon learn that the city is under the stewardship of Stevland, a sentient rainbow bamboo, who offers to feed the humans with carefully crafted fruits. Initially apprehensive about accepting Stevland’s help, the humans soon start to communicate with Stevland and work towards, what Stevland terms, “mutualism.” The novel continues to follow the subsequent generation of Pax’s humans, as they struggle to procreate, continuously seeking to build a new life for themselves *with* Stevland. Pax’s humans eventually find and interact with the original creators of the glass city, the Glassmakers, whose lives have been affected by multiple diseases and social unrest. The interactions between the humans and Glassmakers are often violent and bewildering, resulting in miscommunication and a war between the two groups. Lives are lost on both sides of the war, but, eventually, the humans, some Glassmakers, and Stevland come to an agreement to live according to “mutualism.”

As a speculative fiction text, *Semiosis* is a counterexample to suggestions like those of Lynda H. Schneekloth, whereby “science fiction usually ignores plants, including plant related issues such as food, what people eat and where does it come from.”[[229]](#footnote-229) Instead, *Semiosis* actively engages with plant issues, both ethical and ontological, figuring plants as individuals and as part of the broader speculative flesh ecology. Indeed, *Semiosis* is not alone in its explorations of plant issues, with scholars reading the literary history of the broadly conceived speculative plant in varying ways: 1) “suggests at least an uneasy acknowledgement that plants have capabilities that we humans neither share nor fully comprehend;”[[230]](#footnote-230) 2) “imagine worlds divested of anthropogenic control, where senses are heightened and interconnectivities flourish, for better or worse;”[[231]](#footnote-231) 3) “offer new ways of thinking, or [. . .] feeling, in rapidly changing and multi-species worlds;”[[232]](#footnote-232) and 4) “embodying an *absolute alterity,*”[[233]](#footnote-233) yet“there sometimes glimmers into view the unsettling sense that maybe we are also *like plants*.”[[234]](#footnote-234) Despite the ubiquitous belief that plants are wholly distinct from humans and animals, then, plants in speculative fiction have the ability to alter our perceptions, not only of themselves as individuals, but also of the broader speculative flesh ecology that they exist within. The speculative plant destabilises the ontological and ethical distinctions typically maintained between plants and humans, encouraging us, as Dawn Keetley notes, echoing Matthew Calarco’s zone of indistinction,[[235]](#footnote-235) to see how “we are also *like plants*.”[[236]](#footnote-236) Keetley’s operation of *likeness*, paralleling Calarco’s, does not conform to a process of identity, whereby humans identify aspects about plants that are similar to themselves, affording them rights based on this shared human likeness. Rather, such *likeness* “radically displaces human beings from the center of ethical reflection and that avoids many of the exclusions associated with the lingering forms of anthropocentrism;”[[237]](#footnote-237) Keetley and Calarco’s *likeness* originates from a position of indistinction. *Semiosis* crafts a speculative flesh ecology, where the ignored capabilities of plants are thrown into focus, alongside new ways of living, challenging humans—both character and reader—to rethink how we might be *like plants*, and how these indistinctions establish that “we have ethical and ontological work to do.”[[238]](#footnote-238)

As *Semiosis* engages with the complexities of botanical species ecologies, like those on Pax, the novel encourages us to reconsider our relationship with and consumption of plants, imagining what it means to inhabit “*our* green planet.” The fleshy plants of *Semiosis*, with their thirsty roots and chemical fruits, force us to reconsider the ontological identity and ethical positionality of plants, whose capabilities we are only just beginning to unearth. As thought-filled plants grow within the pages of the novel, they trouble the clean-cut instrumentalization and consumption of plants, proposing new forms of living with plants that do not prioritise one kind of life over another. Grappling with the ethical problems posed by the inevitable need to consume plants, *Semiosis* introduces mutualism as a form of multi-species living, whereby humans and plants engage in a symbiotic relationship, each taking their fill of flesh. As I analyse *Semiosis*, the novel’s speculative flesh ecology produces new understandings of plants’ ontologies, capabilities, and multi-species relationships as flesh, which are accompanied by a slippery but inevitable consumption. Therefore, *Semiosis*’ speculative flesh ecology suggests that when humans see how they are *like plants*, they can begin to move beyond exploitative and instrumentalizing relationships with plants.

## **Grafts**

How can we see how we are *like plants*? How can we move beyond an exploitative and instrumentalizing relationship with plants? How can we foster a mutual relationship with plants, while attending to our own needs? In order to answer these questions, we should turn to Michael Marder’s work on plants. From consuming plants to the vegetality of flesh, Marder’s work grapples with the ontological and ethical position of plants; whereby, plants encourage us “to grow not *against* but *together with* the environment, including other human beings, animals, and plants!”[[239]](#footnote-239)

With these ideas of shared growth, Marder uses the terms “grafts” or “grafting,” to explore the vegetality of flesh; whereby, grafts are an expression of proliferation for both plants and flesh. As Marder notes,

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, of skin breathing through its porous superficies like a leaf, of the entire body put together thanks to additions and superimpositions, not as a closed *either/or* totality but as a potential infinity of *and, and, and…* 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.[[240]](#footnote-240)

Through grafts, Marder’s focus is on the vegetality of flesh, seeking to capture the ways flesh mimics and interacts with vegetal modes of existence, through a specific medical procedure: 1) transplantation and propagation; 2) endless growth and proliferation; 3) porosity; 4) potential infinite wholeness; and 5) fluid identity. The vegetal fleshiness of grafts allows plants to begin dismantling the ontological distinctions between plants, humans, and other nonhumans; they become the epitome of exposed embodiment, open and vulnerable to their surrounding environments, while continuously crafting new expressions of ontological reconfiguration. Each of these grafting features makes a compelling argument for the vegetality of flesh and helps to articulate shared modes of existence between plants and other fleshy beings. However, equally important as the vegetality of flesh, I suggest, is the fleshiness of the vegetal, whereby the vegetal expresses fleshy modes of existence. Only by holding these two positions simultaneously can we see how we are *like plants*. It is this dual identification that lends itself to an indistinct way of exploring plants, humans, and other nonhumans.

In order to develop Marder’s creation of “grafts” into a term that captures both the vegetality of flesh *and* the fleshiness of the vegetal, I suggest that we should opt for the term “plant flesh.” This is not to say that plant flesh would render the ontological possibilities of grafts obsolete, rather plant flesh would entail rethinking both our relationship *to* plants and our relationship *with* plants; being open to the speculative ethical possibilities that arise from this rethinking, in order to see how we are *like plants*. Furthermore, plant flesh captures a few other key ontological aspects of plants that Marder discusses, in other works: 1) plants are vulnerable, both individually and as a synecdoche for nature;[[241]](#footnote-241) 2) plants can simultaneously die in parts and live in others;[[242]](#footnote-242) 3) plants, when consumed, can become part of who or what the eater is;[[243]](#footnote-243) and 4) plants have an indistinct sense of “inside” and “outside,” allowing them to thrive and cooperate with the environment that sustains them.[[244]](#footnote-244) All of these fleshy plant aspects situate the plant, as both an individual and as a whole, in the flesh ecology with both humans and other nonhumans. This quality of flesh, to both embody the individual and the whole, is contemplated by Marder. He suggests that flesh has “a profoundly de-individuating effect,” whereby it “shifts the spotlight to the sensuousness that overflows the confines of an isolated subject or body, which is a node in the living flesh of the world. Differently put, flesh enchants existence.”[[245]](#footnote-245) Here, Marder’s understanding of flesh as always being fundamentally part of the “living flesh of the world”—or, as I would say, as part of the flesh ecology—speaks to his understanding of the fleshiness of plants, since they, too, with their indistinct “inside” and “outside,” are continuously branching out into the flesh ecology, both literally and figuratively. Furthermore, flesh’s enchantment of existence is epitomised in plants’ ability to both live and die, simultaneously, in parts; the vulnerability of exposed embodiment made evident, through their flourishing and decaying plant flesh.

Plant flesh, then, is firmly rooted in the position of indistinction and the speculative ethical possibilities that arise from seeing how we are *like plants*, both through the vegetality of flesh and the fleshiness of the vegetal. However, what are these speculative ethical possibilities, and how do they relate to plants’ role in the (speculative) flesh ecology? Both Marder and Calarco aim to address such speculative ethical possibilities in multiple works, planting the seeds for expansive moral consideration among the current rigidity of anthropocentrism. They propose the possibility of including nonhumans in our systems of moral consideration, by not determining the limits of moral status. Calarco suggests that we should not determine the outer limits of moral status beyond animals. He states,

Unless we proceed from this kind of generous agnosticism, not only are we bound to make mistakes (who would be bold enough to claim that rationality or descriptive phenomenology will overcome our ﬁnitude and speciﬁc historical location in making such judgments?), but also we set up the conditions of possibility for the worst kinds of abuses toward those beings who are left outside the scope of moral concern.[[246]](#footnote-246)

Calarco is keenly aware of the dangers of determining the limits of moral consideration, both historically, presently, and speculatively. These dangers affect *all* beings; therefore, it is in the best interest of *all* beings that we proceed towards the speculative and expansive approach to moral consideration that Calarco suggests. By thinking speculatively about moral consideration, using Calarco’s approach, particularly in speculative fiction, we are able to explore the possibilities of a speculative flesh ecology that does not determine the outer limits of ethical consideration. Since plants, as Marder notes, repeatedly, are “some of the most vulnerable beings on the planet,”[[247]](#footnote-247) they face, have faced, and would continue to face the worst kinds of abuses, by being left outside of ethical consideration. Marder confirms this understanding, when he suggests that “it does not make sense to me to advocate something clearly unethical—a total instrumentalization of certain living beings, or plants—in the name of ethics—a complete de-instrumentalization of other kinds of living beings, or animals.”[[248]](#footnote-248) Marder highlights the contradictions present in this exclusionary form of ethical thinking, which seeks to redraw boundaries between beings. Therefore, drawing on both Marder and Calarco, ethical consideration should proceed from a form of speculative openness, whereby the distinctions between humans, animals, and plants are dismantled, rather than redrawn, in favour of an indistinct approach.

Attempting to move towards these speculative ethical possibilities between humans, animals, and plants, we encounter problems with the way humans typically view and respond to nonhumans—specifically, plants. In *Plant Thinking*, Marder addresses the position of plants in Western thought, stating that they populate “the margin of the margin, the zone of absolute obscurity undetectable on the radars of our conceptualities.”[[249]](#footnote-249) This “zone of absolute obscurity,” rather than opening up a space for ethical and ontological work like the zone of indistinction, closes the plant off from ethical consideration, rendering them not only consumable but also unimportant, too. For Marder, the plant exists at the periphery of living beings, since

akin to us—[plants] are living creatures, [yet] we fail to detect the slightest resemblances to our life in them and, as a consequence of this failure, routinely pass a negative judgement on their worth, as well as on the place they occupy in the modern version of the “Great Chain of Being,” from which both the everyday and the scientific ways of thinking have not yet completely emancipated themselves.[[250]](#footnote-250)

Here, Marder calls for humans to see “resemblances to our life in them”—to see how we are *like plants*—in much the same way that Calarco calls for humans to “recognize that we are in deep and fundamental ways *like animals.*”[[251]](#footnote-251) Both of these positions—plant-thinking and indistinction—call for humans to see how they are *like other beings*, rather than how other beings are like them. They push us towards acknowledging the plant with(in) us to see how we are *like plants*, by encouraging us, I argue, to consider what it means to be plant flesh.

Proceeding from this indistinct position, where we see how we are *like plants*, involves a speculation of the ontological identities and ethical possibilities of plants. In other words, what would plant thinking look like in practice? Firstly, plant ethics, Marder suggests, “is not a set of general precepts or guidelines, as those fall within the purview of morality. Rather, it is rooted in respect for each species or each plant, which is renewed and experienced differently in our encounters with them.”[[252]](#footnote-252) Plant ethics, then, requires us to constantly reform, develop, grow, proliferate, expand—*like plants*—and reassess our ethical approach, rather than attempting to follow a rigid set of guidelines. As we move towards living together *with* plants, we allow ourselves to be open to shifting ethical possibilities. Despite his reservations of a strict set of guidelines, Marder does provide possibilities—with some practical examples—for this speculative ethical thinking, proposing ways for humans to begin deconstructing their total instrumentalization of plants and move towards an ethical consideration withplants. Marder notes a few examples of practical action that could be taken in the name of plant ethics: “a ban on genetic manipulation,” “the right to be free of arbitrary violence and total instrumentalization,” “imposing severe restrictions on logging practices,” and “making wanton destruction of vegetation a violation of plant rights.”[[253]](#footnote-253) To implement these examples, Marder suggests, would be to “acknowledge the plants’ intrinsic value and, as a result, set limits on their utilization for external ends.”[[254]](#footnote-254) With these examples in mind, Marder not only provides a starting point for plant ethics, but he also captures the ubiquity of humans’ instrumentalization of plants; instrumentalization happens in floral fissures across the world, and, therefore, plant ethics requires an ever-expanding approach. Akin to growing, this expanding, open, and speculative approach to plant ethics, draws on and reiterates the need for exploring the concept of plant flesh. As Marder notes,

*like plants*, animals and humans are “growing beings.” Plant ethics would be an ethics of growth, animated by a desire to promote vegetal, cross-species, and cross-kingdoms communities, to let them thrive on their own accord, and to affirm life throbbing in the shared trajectories of plant, animal, and human flourishing [my emphasis].[[255]](#footnote-255)

Through plant ethics, as limbs extend and flesh proliferates, humans, animals, and plants, engage in both fleshy proliferation and ethical growth, captured in the concept of plant flesh. Not only do these fleshy and ethical modes of plant existence produce indistinctions among plants, humans, and animals, but they also develop multi-species communities, which emerge from these ever-proliferating indistinctions. In plant ethics, we learn to grow—both ontologically and ethically—*with* plants, developing our understanding of how we are *like plants*.

Combining shared growing and multi-species communities, plant ethics begins to take shape, but Marder is keen to remind us that

ethical concerns are never problems to be resolved once and for all; they make us uncomfortable and sometimes, when the sting of conscience is too strong, prevent us from sleeping. Being disconcerted by a single pea to the point of unrest is analogous to the ethical obsession, untranslatable into the language of moral axioms and principles of righteousness. Such ethics do not dictate how to treat the specimen of Pisum sativum, or any other plant, but they do urge us to respond, each time anew, to the question of how, in thinking and eating, to say “yes” to plants.[[256]](#footnote-256)

As we feel the weight of the Pisum sativum pressing into us, we feel the uncomfortable call of ethics in our flesh, asking us to respond to plants in new ways. I argue that speculative fiction allows us to dwell in these uncomfortable places and feel the lump of Pisum sativum not as a barrier but as a speculative opportunity, where we begin to see how we are *like plants*, through the indistinction of flesh. By grasping and expanding this speculative and open approach to ethical consideration, speculative fiction demonstrates that this approach is in the best interests of not just plants, but other nonhumans and humans, too. As we engage in a continuous process of establishing and re-establishing plant ethics, speculative fiction illustrates that we also need to attend to the differences between animals and plants and be willing to make allowances for these differences; for example, plant flesh offers us a perspective on the inevitable need to consume, which animal flesh does not. Therefore, speculative flesh ecologies proceed from experimentation, where the goal is not to come up with a definitive answer, but, rather, to challenge us to think ethically, to speculatively imagine varied and fluctuating ways of becoming *with* plants. As Marder calls for us to respond anew, speculative fiction generates spaces for us to undertake these responses, by imagining plant capabilities and ethical questions that we are not yet aware of. With communicative bamboo and carnivorous vines, speculative fiction crafts environments that extrapolate and complicate our understanding of plant capabilities and ontologies; in doing so, they ask us to ethically respond anew to these scenarios. They afford us the space to respond to saying “yes” to plants, whereby we say “yes” to the ethical possibilities of plants, to multi-species communities, and to ethical forms of inevitable consumption.

## **A Niche in this Ecology for Ourselves**

By focusing on plant flesh, in this chapter, I will explore how Burke’s *Semiosis* attempts to consider plants—albeit often only individual plants—as fleshy beings of ethical consideration, within the novel’s speculative flesh ecology. Analysing plant flesh advances the understanding of the speculative flesh ecology by: 1) encouraging humans to confront how they are *like* other nonhumans, who are seemingly ontologically distinct from themselves; 2) troubling the clean-cut consumption and instrumentalization of plants; 3) demonstrating that plant consumption does not necessitate total instrumentalization; and 4) illustrating the ways flesh is able to sustain, regenerate, proliferate, and transform across species distinctions. *Semiosis* allows us to think about and tease out ways in which we can live *together with* plants, as well as acknowledging how we are *like* plants. It postulates answers to a question that Calarco poses: “How can I, or better, how can *we* consume (and be consumed, because consumption runs both ways!) as respectfully as possible?”[[257]](#footnote-257) Therefore, *Semiosis* generates a speculative flesh ecology where we respond anew, in uncomfortable and ethical ways, to plants.

Before leaving Earth, Pax’s human colonisers envisioned their life within a new ecology:

Our new civilisation would be based on the best of Earth. We would respect the dignity of all life, practice justice and compassion, and seek joy and beauty. We brought educational programs in our computers for our children that left out Earthly irrationalities like money, religion, and war. Some thought we would contaminate an exoecology, but we meant to fit in, to add to it, and most of all to ensure that humanity’s fate would not depend on a single imperiled planet.[[258]](#footnote-258)

In desiring to become a seamless part of Pax’s ecology (or extraterrestrial ecology—exoecology—as they refer to it), the human colonisers’ aims appear to align with these ideas of living *together with* plants and the environment, rather than claiming dominion, like on Earth. In these lamentations about Earth, the human colonisers acknowledge that “much of the current environmental crisis is due to our refusal to come to terms with our co-imbrication with the rest of the world, which we unabashedly shape in our own image, heavily skewed toward abstract intelligence.”[[259]](#footnote-259) They have new visions of *our* green planet, where humanity can thrive as one species among many, alongside the other inhabitants of Pax, pinning their hopes on this new green planet. These seemingly egalitarian ambitions are also clearly ambiguous, since statements about respecting the dignity of *all* life are not qualified. Instead, they are left—rather purposefully—open-ended, to ensure their actions on Pax can remain equally vague. Their speculative intentions are underwritten by a marred history and a focus on the continuation of the human species, of human flesh proliferating human flesh, which threatens to disturb their new aim of living *together with* plants.

As the human colonisers set foot on Pax, ready to engage with the ecology around them, they recall Marder’s recognition of the historical and speculative visions of plant life:

Plants do not exist exclusively for animal and human consumption; on the contrary, they had already flourished long before we made our appearance onto the evolutionary scene. This is the fundamental reason for entertaining the possibility of plant rights. A more pragmatic justification hinges on the need to protect some of the most vulnerable living beings on the planet. The evolutionary success of plants and their tenacity could be offset by human destruction of the flora on a scale unparalleled by any other species.[[260]](#footnote-260)

Like plants on Earth, *Semiosis*’ plants had already been flourishing, long before the human colonisers set foot on Pax. The humans have the potential to destroy Pax’s flora, if they do not proceed from an ethical position of living *together with* plants. Pax’s first-generation botanist, Octavo’s job, “besides searching for edible plants was to describe and classify Pax’s vegetation.”[[261]](#footnote-261) As on Earth, there is an inherent connection on Pax between plants’ classification and their speculative instrumentalization—each plant assessed to see if it is ripe for the taking. Octavo

was finding fruits, seeds, roots, stems, and flowers that might prove useful or edible, which was the pressing issue. Moreover, as the colony’s botanist, I had to devise a taxonomy. Every scrap of information would help as we looked for a niche in this ecology for ourselves.[[262]](#footnote-262)

In search of this ecological niche, Pax’s human colonisers become redirected towards their search for and classification of edible plants—their concern for their anthropogenic impact takes a back seat to survival. They classify and carve up their surrounding plants into consumable commodities, with every plant’s importance resting on their speculative instrumentalization.

It soon becomes clear that Pax’s plants are not so easily instrumentalized, resisting and communicating with their human colonisers in oftentimes violent ways. As Octavo comes to realise, “probably Pax plants had had more time to evolve. The greenery around me held secrets I would never learn.”[[263]](#footnote-263) The hidden capabilities of Pax’s plants—all at once, violent, calculated, and resourceful—destabilise Octavo’s preconceptions about plant life. Their resistance complicates their instrumentalization, and the humans must engineer new ways of ensuring the plant instrumentalization that appears so intrinsic for their survival—they had not considered that plants might fight back. Despite the apparent estranged nature of Pax’s plants, their capabilities are speculative extrapolations of Earth’s plants; Pax’s plants are simply better able to articulate and better equipped to resist human instrumentalization.

While the human colonisers seek their ecological niche through plant instrumentalization, Aubrey Streit Krug suggests that these processes cannot only be read as forms of instrumentalization; instead,

as plants are gathered, classified, sown, eaten, and bred, plant bodies become linked to the life and health of human bodies. Simple distinctions between plants and humans and other animals begin to break down when perceived through multiple conceptions of the body, from individual to cultural, from political to material.[[264]](#footnote-264)

Pax’s plants are integral to their ecology, and, if we follow Streit Krug, their classification, cultivation, and consumption can be read as encouraging humans—and other nonhumans—to see how they are *like plants*. It is not simply that plants are carved and consumed, through instrumentalization; rather, these processes begin to dismantle distinctions between humans, plants, and other nonhumans, encouraging an indistinct approach between fleshy beings in the speculative flesh ecology. With their dual instrumentalization, resistance, and fleshy indistinction, then, the plants force us to confront our preconceptions about plant life and see how—in multifaceted ways—we are *like plants*. For Pax’s human colonisers, then, finding an ecological niche means considering not only the instrumentalization of plants, but also their expressions of life, resistance, and indistinction.

## **To Tap Flesh for Food and Blood for Water**

In detailing his definition of “grafts,” Marder explores the oftentimes violent, fleshy exposure of the grafting process:

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.[[265]](#footnote-265)

Marder makes clear the inextricable link between the violence of the grafting process and the indistinction between elements of flesh that follows; before a successful graft, there are moments of violent exposure. For Marder, this violence is an appearance, it embodies a fluid identity, and—above all—it is necessary for the transformation and seamlessness of the grafts. This appearance of violence, that accompanies this transformation, is explored in *Semiosis*; Pax’s plants appear to make violent expressions, in order to transform both their flesh and the flesh of others around them. *Semiosis* develops the grafting process, where it becomes an exploration of plant flesh; the vegetality of flesh and the fleshiness of the vegetal are explored through moments of instrumentalization, consumption, and violence. However, for the human colonisers, the apparent violence of the plants is not so easily forgotten or made prior, like Marder suggests; instead, the human colonisers cling to such violence, allowing it to shape their relationship with their newly encountered plant co-habitants. In their grief, they grapple with the plant with(in) us, before slowly coming to terms with how they can best live *together with* plants.

One of the first plants Pax’s human colonisers interact with and instrumentalize is, what they term, the “snow vine;” a bamboo-related plant that bears edible fruit. Initially, the relationship between the humans and the East snow vine and its daughter plant, Snowman, imitates plant-human relationships on Earth—their fruits are harvested for food, while their vines are pruned for maintenance. The humans are pleased with how easily instrumentalized Snowman seems to be; their vines even allow the humans’ own plants from Earth to grow alongside them. However, during one of their harvesting trips, three women from the colony are found dead after eating fruit from the West snow vine—crucially, noted as being a “different individual”[[266]](#footnote-266) to Snowman and the East Vine:

The three women lay on the other side of the shrub, baskets of snow fruit set down beside them [. . .]. But we had expected something far worse. I had tried to prepare myself for dismembered bodies, perhaps half-eaten or disfigured by giant coral stings, evidence of attack and predation in the battle for survival. The women seemed to have fallen asleep. They had had peaceful deaths. This was wrong.[[267]](#footnote-267)

In his role as botanist, Octavo has already categorised the dangerous—and potentially deadly—beings of Pax, of which the snow vine is not one. As the women’s flesh is carved and consumed, in his mind, he expects to find more gruesome—yet, strangely more palatable—scenes from an animal attack, with its imagined violence helping to make sense of the women’s deaths; however, it appears that a plant attack is far more insidious. The snow vines have used their fruits to poison the women; their method of murder has subverted the women’s anticipated flesh consumption, replacing it with the consumption of plant flesh that lulls them passively into death. The absence of explicit violence is not enough to make the human colonisers dismiss the plant’s actions and culpability; instead, it becomes both a warning of Pax’s plants’ capabilities and an ominous reminder that the humans are yet to find their “niche” in Pax’s ecology.

After burying the women’s bodies in the cemetery, Octavo goes over to check on their graves, noticing abnormally quick decay on the flowers they placed on them. As he begins to feel around in the loose soil,

My fingers, brushing through the sod, felt something firm, springy with life. A white shoot, like bamboo and wide as my thumb, rose from the soil. I found another, another, and more. Snow vines sprouted from the three women’s graves. The vines had sent out roots to feed on dead humans instead of aspen trees, to tap flesh for food and blood for water. One vine had killed them and the other was feeding on them.[[268]](#footnote-268)

Speaking to plant flesh’s vegetal fleshiness and fleshy vegetality, the East vine’s haptic fleshiness becomes Octavo’s first indicator of the plant’s instrumentalization of the women’s bodies—“exposed to one another in all their nudity,”[[269]](#footnote-269) from dead human flesh sprouts living plant flesh. The East Vine transforms both their own and the women’s flesh, shaping the ecology to suit themself; as Marder notes, “plants are the artists of themselves: they create themselves and their environments all the time: losing parts and acquiring new ones, changing the landscape and the airscape, moulding themselves and their world through forms inseparable from vegetal matter.”[[270]](#footnote-270) The East vine wastes no time turning the women’s flesh into food, growing multiple vines into their flesh, so the women, like the aspen trees before them, become sustenance for the ravenous snow vines. Their transformation into plant nourishment is not surprising, since, as Keetley notes, “while humans may occasionally become food for predatory animals, we all, whether buried in the ground or scattered on the earth, become sustenance for plants. Ashes to ashes. Flesh to food.”[[271]](#footnote-271) This process, then, does not seem unusual; they have merely partaken in a natural process, with their dead flesh flowing into the plants’ living flesh. However, the women’s cause of death (being poisoned by the West snow vine’s fruit) complicates the naturalness of plant-human consumption. They have been poisoned by one snow vine with the intention of being consumed by the other; in other words, like many plants before them, the three women’s flesh has “become part of who or what the eater is.”[[272]](#footnote-272)

As well as being a form of consumption, the interaction between the East Vine’s flesh and the women’s flesh resembles a modification of the grafting process. Each of the elements that Marder identifies is present: 1) transformation and propagation, 2) endless growth and proliferation, 3) porosity, 4) infinite wholeness, and 5) fluid identity. By grafting their flesh onto and within the women’s flesh, the East vine has incorporated them into their being, transforming the women’s flesh into a part of themselves and making both the vegetality of the women’s’ flesh and the fleshiness of the plant’s vegetality explicitly evident. However, Octavo and the other human colonisers refuse to subscribe to either the naturalness of the process or the transformation of the women’s flesh, seeing the East vine’s actions as furtively violent—rather than expressions of plant living on this unfamiliar planet—and absent of the possibilities of ontological indistinctions. Enraged by their deaths, Octavo “whipped out [his] machete and hacked apart the colorless shoots without thinking, kicked open the soil to find every last one, and chopped them all to bits.” [[273]](#footnote-273) Unsettled by the absence of visceral violence from the women’s deaths, Octavo reinscribes this site of fleshy transformation with the comforting presence of oozing butchery, where “dismembered bodies,” “half-eaten or disfigured”[[274]](#footnote-274) abound. However, his machete does not inflict these blows on human flesh, but on plant flesh, instead. He hunts down the vine’s network of plant roots, marking clearly the “evidence of attack and predation in the battle for survival”[[275]](#footnote-275) that the women were denied. All at once, the snow vine is malicious and vulnerable; its tender vines easily butchered by Octavo’s machete. As human hands make quick work of the snow vine, fragmenting endless roots into deadened stumps, Octavo’s actions recall both the human colonisers’ fears of disrupting Pax’s ecology and of repeating their violent and instrumentalizing relationships with plants from Earth. As Marder comments, “the evolutionary success of plants and their tenacity could be offset by human destruction of the flora on a scale unparalleled by any other species.”[[276]](#footnote-276) Therefore, as sharp metal slices shooting flesh, Octavo’s perpetration of these violent behaviours is antithetical to the human coloniser’s initial doctrine: “respect the dignity of all life, practice justice and compassion, and seek joy and beauty.”[[277]](#footnote-277)

As Octavo observes his violently fragmented handiwork, he recognises his complicity in perpetuating humans’ destruction of flora; they have travelled from one planet of human-plant instrumentalization to another, seemingly condemned to repeat the same violent mistakes. Through the slicing disruption of machetes and the severing of flesh, Octavo’s actions expose the nature and motivations of Pax’s plants, so that we come to understand their transformative grafting process not solely as furtively violent, but as routes to indistinction, through the “semi-forgotten violence” of plant flesh. As Octavo laments,

the cycle of life always reuses the dead, and I had succeeded only in despoiling the graves. I gazed at clods of soil, dead flowers, and white vines bleeding sap. I smoothed the ground as neatly as I could over the graves, and left.[[278]](#footnote-278)

With human flesh tapped for food and water, this blossoming display of consumption becomes a site of indistinction, where the dual edibility and grafting of flesh reveals the transformation, proliferation, porosity, wholeness, and ontological ambiguity of both the women’s flesh and the snow vine’s flesh. In his violent reinscribing, Octavo has disrupted the grafting process; as Marder suggests, in grafts, “only at the price of a prior, semi-forgotten violence can the sense of seamlessness and continuity be maintained.”[[279]](#footnote-279) Octavo’s reinscribing of the women’s deaths with the marker of bleeding violence—of “white vines bleeding sap”—followed by their soiled cover-up, serves to expose this semi-forgotten violence of the grafting process, whereby the seamlessness and indistinction between human flesh and plant flesh is disrupted. Therefore, although the evidence of this violence—ragged stumps of snow vine flesh and germinated women’s flesh—has been concealed by the smoothing of soil, it remains unfinished under lumps of earth.

Perturbed by the women’s seamless enmeshment with plant flesh, Octavo surveys the snow vine fields for further sites of instrumentalization. There, hidden under lumps of earth, ready to recall the semi-forgotten violence of grafts, is the decaying and germinating flesh of a fippokat—a cat-like animal native to Pax:

A stink drew us to a lump of green turf, actually a bloated fippokat corpse. Ripe fruit hung on the vines on one side of the meadow. “I bet those are poisonous,” I said [. . .] I pushed at the dead fippokat with the toe of my boot. It was anchored to the ground somehow. I prodded the corpse with my machete, holding my breath against the smell. A thick root emerged from its belly and buried itself in the soil beneath it. Something poked up under the fur. I sliced the poor thing open. Inside, a snow seed had germinated. I thought of the three women’s graves. The west vine had employed them just like this fippokat to carry away its seeds and used the dead bodies as fertilizer. I hacked off the shoot springing out of the fippokat. I had learned everything I needed to know. I knew what we were.[[280]](#footnote-280)

With olfactory indicators of fleshy decay seeping out of vegetal covered ground, ripe fippokat flesh feeds ripe snow vine fruit, both poisoned, ready to welcome more flesh into their fold. Unlike Octavo’s violent butchery, the subtle violence of the snow vine’s grafts does not rip flesh apart and fragment it into pieces; instead it enmeshes flesh, seeking to transplant plant flesh onto animal flesh and create an endlessly proliferating whole. Roots and muscle, seeds and intestines, sap and blood, flow through one another, tapping into the vegetality of flesh and the fleshiness of the vegetal implicit in plant flesh’s operationalisation of grafts. As lumps of turf and snow vine seeds grow on and within the fippokat’s flesh, the fippokat has been grafted to the vine, able to germinate life and cultivate fresh tissue from rotting flesh. Through their exposure in grafts, both the fippokat and the snow vine have been transformed, with the snow vine’s plant flesh shaping the fippokat’s flesh into new forms. The grafting process witnessed here also recalls plants’ artistry, where “they create themselves and their environments all the time: losing parts and acquiring new ones, changing the landscape and the airscape, moulding themselves and their world through forms inseparable from vegetal matter.”[[281]](#footnote-281) The fippokat has been anchored to the landscape with subtle violence and artistic strokes, becoming part of this changed world moulded by plant flesh. Despite this inseparability of vegetal matter, once again, Octavo reinscribes this scene of subtle, semi-forgotten violence with more explicit displays of butchery, as “white vines bleeding sap” give way to severed fippokat leaking decomposition. As he slices open the “poor thing” with his machete to reveal the enmeshment of flesh, he disrupts the grafting process, rupturing the seamlessness and continuity of snow vine roots grafted onto fippokat entrails. To ensure the disruption of this violent butchery, Octavo also severs the germinating shoot growing from inside the fippokat. As *Semiosis* illustrates, with the presence of humans, the snow vine’s grafts become “exceptionally difficult to achieve and sustain,”[[282]](#footnote-282) even with the price of prior poisonous violence. Enmeshed in grafts, fragmented in human violence, the snow vine and fippokat both express the exposure, transformation, propagation, proliferation, porosity, wholeness, and fluid identity intrinsic to grafts, becoming indistinct through plant flesh.

Unsettled by what Octavo views as the snow vine’s instrumentalization of human and animal flesh, he proclaims that he knows “what we were,” what their niche in this ecology is: “objects to abuse.”[[283]](#footnote-283) To confirm his hypothesis, the human colonisers

dug up the graves of Carrie, Ninia, and Zee. We found a mass of roots at war tangled through their flesh. The seeds from the west vine had sprouted, stems and roots bursting through their abdomens. But roots from the east thicket had countered, strangling the seedlings. The east vine had won. I confessed to attacking the west vine’s seedlings.[[284]](#footnote-284)

Octavo still views the women’s bodies as a battlefield, where flesh is fragmented, fought over, and forgotten—where they are objects of abuse—rather than as a site of grafting or as part of Pax’s ecological organisation, where flesh is recycled, repurposed, and regenerated—where they are wholly transformed through plant flesh. As roots “at war” tangle through flesh, they recall not scenes of battle, but sites of grafting, where subtle violence is buried beneath layers of Pax’s environment. Hidden under lumps of turf, then, are the remnants of the subtle, semi-forgotten violence of grafts, where flesh’s enmeshment has, once again, been ruptured by human hands. Their tangled flesh, where germinated seeds sprout from empty wombs, captures the continuous growing and proliferation of plant flesh, with human flesh and plant flesh becoming indistinct from one another—in the soil, they generate life from decay. Recalling Octavo’s earlier violent outbursts, the vines appear to strangle one another’s seedlings, hacking off their shoots with botanical blades; yet, buried beneath layers of Pax’s top soil, their strangulations are more akin to the subtle, semi-forgotten violence of grafts, only to be exposed and made explicit by violent human rupturing.

In this unearthed scene of plant-human grafting, where vines tangle and sprout, it becomes clear that even though Octavo butchered the snow vine’s roots, he was unable to kill the plant and halt the adapted grafting process. This regenerative proliferation of the snow vines speaks to Marder’s claim that

the same plant can wither and flourish at the same time, die in parts and continue to live in other parts, so that life and death literally get dispersed on its body. It can accomplish this feat thanks to the fact that it is not an organism, obeying the logic of an internally differentiated living whole, but a loose assemblage of quasi-independent members.[[285]](#footnote-285)

While white vines bleed sap, therefore, they highlight not the destruction of the plant as a whole, but simply the severing of some of these “quasi-independent members.” Their vegetal fleshiness allows them to sustain their flesh, even as parts of it are butchered by human colonisers. Furthermore, as the three women’s bodies and the fippokat are feasted upon and fertilised, dead human and animal remains become part of living plant bodies. The snow vine’s incorporation of dead human and animal flesh simultaneously reifies and transforms their ability to die in parts and live in others—they actively entrap and seek out dying flesh to enmesh with their living flesh. As such, in the snow vine’s grafts, dying parts become living once more, through plant flesh.

Acknowledging their role in Pax’s ecology as “objects to abuse,”[[286]](#footnote-286) the human colonisers begin testing out ways to find a more favourable niche in Pax’s ecology, that does not rely on being poisoned for sustenance by thirsty snow vines. Octavo suggests that to ensure their futurity, the humans need to

“work *for* it, not the other way around. It will help us only because it is helping itself. We give it food and water—our latrines and irrigation and cemetery—and we help it advance, just as if we were a colony of fippokats.” “That’s fine,” Wendy said, grinning. “We wanted to fit into the ecology. We won’t be aliens anymore”[[287]](#footnote-287)

The humans’ protection and survival, then, is based on plant flesh proliferation—the humans must cultivate their own flesh to survive. Feeding and watering the snow vines involves providing them with alternative waste—human secretions and voluntarily given corpses—that ensure that the vines are satiated enough not to go hunting for living flesh. As they provide access to their cemetery, they willingly allow the vines to feast on flesh—the same subtle violences that disturbed Octavo are now encouraged—where they graft human and animal tissues, through semi-forgotten violence, under the cover of Pax’s soil. The humans begin to realise that, in order to find their niche in this ecology, they must stop resisting becoming part of Pax’s environment; if they do not, they will be forced by plant poisoning to live and die within the earth. Unlike the human colonisers, Pax’s plants “lack the metaphysical distinction between the “inside” and the “outside” and do not set themselves in opposition to the environment that sustains them.”[[288]](#footnote-288) Following this practice of plant living, then, the humans will be able to find their niche within this speculative flesh ecology, providing willingly given flesh for food and blood for water. As Keetley suggests, when we die and become food for plants, “each of us becomes the landscape from which we spend our lives trying to distinguish ourselves.”[[289]](#footnote-289) Therefore, as the human colonisers become food for plants, they do, indeed, become the landscape that they initially tried to distinguish themselves from, becoming “anchored to the ground somehow,”[[290]](#footnote-290) where snow vine roots enmesh flesh and seeds germinate inside emptied abdomens.

As they come face to flora with the complex reality of Pax’s seemingly pernicious ecology, the human colonisers now understand that they must live *together with* plants—in troublingly violent ways—in order to survive, even if this means surrendering their own flesh. They have found their niche in this ecology, where they “won’t be aliens anymore;”[[291]](#footnote-291) instead, they will be part of Pax. Through the grafts that accompany plant consumption, humans and animals’ dead flesh will live on through plant flesh, propagating new life in Pax’s ecology. Therefore, as *Semiosis* demonstrates, and unlike Sperling’s suggestion that “plants arguably remain on the margins of comprehensible subject-hood and thus difficult to imagine as intertwined with bodies of humans,”[[292]](#footnote-292) the snow vines on Pax enmesh themselves into the flesh of both humans, animals, and the earth that surrounds them. Their ability to intertwine—both physically and theoretically—is evident in their violent and disturbing movements of instrumentalization and grafting. Grafts show us, then, that initial, subtle, and semi-forgotten violences are necessary for creating the indistinction between flesh that follows; for successful grafts—for successful indistinction—there are moments of violent exposure.

Despite the other humans’ support for this new way of living that acknowledges their niche in the ecology, Octavo remains suspicious of Pax’s plants’ capabilities and behaviours, suggesting that this will be the first step in a much larger conflict between the human colonisers and Pax’s plants. As Octavo laments,

we thought we could come in peace and find a happy niche in another ecology. Instead we found a battlefield. The east vine turned us into servile mercenaries, nothing more than big, clever fippokats helping it win another battle [. . .] I kept my disappointment to myself.[[293]](#footnote-293)

With Octavo’s final words in mind, we can ask, what other ways of living *together with* plants might Pax’s botanically filled speculative flesh ecology offer and how might we consume and be consumed in ways that do not necessitate complete instrumentalization?

## **I Gave Them Fruit**

Throughout his expansive work on plants, Marder often begins his explorations of plant life with evidence and musings of their capacities and experiences. One example Marder repeatedly returns to is the research of the Blaustein Institute for Desert Research, who found that “a pea plant subjected to drought conditions communicated its abiotic stress to other such plants, with which it shared its rooting volumes.”[[294]](#footnote-294) Marder uses this example to complicate the long-held belief that “plants are generally understood as little more than photosynthesising green machines—those quasi-things passively embedded in the places of their growth.”[[295]](#footnote-295) Since the research from the Blaustein Institute reveals the previously hidden communicative abilities of plants, Marder suggests that we should attempt to create an ethical relationship with plants that rethinks “the status of plants not only as objects to be protected but also as subjects to be respected.”[[296]](#footnote-296) He asks, “is it morally permissible to submit to total instrumentalization living beings that, though they do not have a central nervous system, are capable of basic learning and communication?”[[297]](#footnote-297) While Marder’s question appears to rely solely on the inherent value of communication as a source of ethical responsibility, it also reflects the complication of the boundaries of moral considerability that occurs when previously hidden aspects of plants are seen. If we have only recently seen plants’ ability to communicate, what else might they, and other nonhumans, be able to experience? What new ways of living *together with* one another might they be able to teach us? And how might we move towards modes of consumption—as both the consumer and consumed—that do not necessitate total instrumentalization?

When the human colonisers venture further into Pax’s environment, they come across another fruiting tree, a rainbow bamboo called Stevland—he offers fruit, seemingly without the expectation of reciprocation. With the snow vine’s actions still fresh in their minds, the human colonisers are wary of Stevland’s intentions, ever cautious that he may try to poison them and tap their flesh for food and blood for water. However, Sylvia, one of the humans, suggests that ““the rainbow bamboo probably wants what the snow vine does,” I said, “gifts and a little help.””[[298]](#footnote-298) As they exchange gifts of fruit and flesh, they begin working together towards an alternative way of *living together with* one another: what Stevland calls “mutualism.” For Stevland, mutualism is a process, whereby,

I survive with the help of servant animals and plants, and for the most fruitful relationships, I must help them in return. I could help the foreigners far more if we could share ideas in addition to nutrients. From an interplay and merging of intelligence, all things could result, things that have never existed before, and our world will grow.[[299]](#footnote-299)

For Stevland, mutualism is not simply about his own survival; instead, mutualism is concerned with the survival of the ecology of Pax, as a whole. Despite his initial superiority complex and preoccupation of the animal/plant dualism, mutualism becomes his default position and “I gave them fruit”[[300]](#footnote-300) becomes his default action, providing potential “servant animals” with both a nutritious and addictive food source and a sign of his mutualistic intentions. As such, Stevland’s mutualism—a shared and beneficial system of living—also echoes Marder’s comments for achieving “plant liberation,” where he notes, it would be “a political-economic reorganization and of shifting our thinking away from efficient systems of food production to modes of solidarity and cohabitation—nutritive not excluded—with other living beings.”[[301]](#footnote-301) Stevland’s mutualism, then, could provide one way of thinking about how we can live *together with* plants and begin to see how we are *like plants*, too, so that “our world will grow.”[[302]](#footnote-302)

When Sylvia and Julian venture to the abandoned glass city and encounter Stevland, for the first time, they notice his mutualistic gesture, commenting,

The bamboo was very friendly. Fruit appeared right away near the house where we stayed. Then one of the trunks where we’d tied our hammocks grew a shoot. Each of the new leaves had stripes of a different color, a little rainbow built out of leaves instead of bark to show that it had observed us and recognized us as an intelligent species like itself. It had delivered a message, a welcome home, because it wanted us to stay.[[303]](#footnote-303)

Like the snow vines before him, Stevland wastes no time in making his intentions clear; however, instead of poisoning and consuming the humans, he provides a fruitful offering, encouraging *them* to consume *him*. The violence of past human-animal-plant relationships is reconfigured; he exposes himself to the most violent of interactions—vulnerable to his surroundings—willing the humans to commune with him in this moment of respectful consumption, in order to craft new expressions of ontological reconfiguration. His proliferating flesh becomes a signifier of his mutualism, while also casting a new meaning onto how plants, when consumed, “become part of who or what the eater is”[[304]](#footnote-304)—Stevland wants them to consume his flesh, in order to cultivate mutualism between them.

These kinds of mutualistic relationships, Robert Raguso and André Kessler suggest, are common outside of speculative fiction, too, since “plants engage in mutualistic interactions at all scales, including belowground nutritional partnerships (mycorrhizae, rhizobia), aboveground defensive partnerships (endophytes, bodyguards, carnivores), and animal-mediated reproductive partnerships (pollination, seed dispersal).”[[305]](#footnote-305) On Pax, their mutualistic relationship involves Stevland sharing food, warning signs, and knowledge with the humans, while they provide him with protection, proliferation, and community. This mutual exchange between the humans and Stevland echoes “the daily interactions of plants, as well as many humans, [where they] operate more according to a gift economy model than by calculating the returns on their investments.”[[306]](#footnote-306) Within mutualism, therefore, the participants give without demanding reciprocation. One locustwood tree jokes with Stevland about what he has to offer the humans: ‘“humans work for fancy, fruity, oversized grass. What do they see in you?,’ to which Stevland replies, ‘fruit-eaters like fancy fruit,’ I tell him. ‘I treat them well.’”[[307]](#footnote-307) In this humorous exchange, Stevland’s fruits are the main benefit for the humans; he grows and shares his own plant flesh to feed, satisfy, and regulate theirs. The humans’ benefit to Stevland, too, involves a proliferation of flesh, as well as a step towards community, since he comments, “because of the foreign animals, I am more than yesterday, bigger, smarter, stronger. Strong as I once was.”[[308]](#footnote-308) With both flesh and community proliferating from this mutualistic relationship, it appears to be the ideal path forward for acknowledging how we are *like plants* and for living *together with* plants.

As humans partake in Stevland’s flesh, they also offer him—like the snow vines before him—the option to partake in their flesh and the flesh of any other animals who die nearby, too. This fleshy mutualism is explored, when Stevland warns the human colonisers of an approaching convocation of eagles—giant human flesh-eating birds of Pax—using the scents from his flowers. From plant flesh, through olfactory senses, comes a warning to protect human flesh. With his warning, the human colonisers are able to protect themselves from the eagles, resulting in many of the birds’ deaths. As a signifier of the gratitude for Stevland’s mutualism, the humans bury the eagles’ flesh next to Stevland’s roots, allowing him to “tap flesh for food and blood for water” [[309]](#footnote-309):

I can feel iron. It flows abundant from my roots to the tips of my leaves to make chlorophyll and transport electric charges for respiration and photosynthesis. Iron is growth, this iron from the flesh of many animals buried to feed me.[[310]](#footnote-310)

In this visceral description of flesh consumption and grafting—much like the snow vine’s consumption and grafting of the women’s flesh—Stevland draws out the nutrients from the eagles’ flesh, using their decaying flesh to sustain his own. Once again, from dead animal flesh sprouts living plant flesh, where dying parts become living once more, through plant flesh. Unlike Octavo’s violent reinscribing of women’s deaths, however, with this mutualistic relationship with Stevland, human hands seek to conceal violence, rather than make it explicit, and suture flesh, rather than rupture it. Therefore, as iron moves from the eagles’ flesh into Stevland’s, he subverts Marder’s suggestion that the plant can “become part of who or what the eater is;”[[311]](#footnote-311) instead, the *eaten* becomes part of who or what the plant is, transforming more evidently fleshy nutrients (iron) into more clearly vegetal nutrients (chlorophyll), under the cover of Pax’s earth.

With their mutualistic relationship progressing, eagle flesh is not the only flesh that Stevland consumes and grafts; instead, the human colonisers allow him access to their cemetery, where he can partake in their dead flesh, feeling as the iron flows abundantly through his roots. As Tatiana laments, “we will bury her in the cemetery, and Stevland will send larger roots to feed on her, just as he will do to me when old age takes me.”[[312]](#footnote-312) Stevland and the human colonisers build a community together, the flesh and bones of which will be feasted upon by Stevland, living forever in his roots. This community, built on mutualism, causes Stevland to reflect on humans’ fleshy fragility; unlike plant flesh, human flesh cannot so easily “die in parts and continue to live in other parts, so that life and death literally get dispersed on its body.”[[313]](#footnote-313) As Stevland comments, “I am large. Humans are fragile. They might all be killed, but I would survive in one form or another despite anything the Glassmakers might do to me, and I would be desolate beyond imagination.”[[314]](#footnote-314) Their mutualistic relationship, then, has not only complicated the ontological distinctions between plants and humans, through enmeshed grafts and indistinct consumptions, but it has also caused both Stevland and the humans to begin thinking ethically about one another, aware of the vulnerability and exposure of one another’s flesh. Therefore, in these mutualistic consumptions between Stevland and the humans—which are, all at once, exposed, violent, and consensual—Stevland and the human colonisers capture what it means to live *together with* plants, recognise how we are *like plants*, and attend to the plant with(in) us.

Since the human colonisers consume Stevland’s fruit, they speak to Marder’s suggestions on how to eat plants, while showing “respect to the other potentialities of one’s source of nutrition, resisting the urge to convert them entirely into food.”[[315]](#footnote-315) Marder notes that “with regard to eating plants, it is helpful to know that we can nourish ourselves on some of their parts, such as fruits, without killing the entire organism.”[[316]](#footnote-316) As the humans and Stevland exemplify Marder’s speculative ethical consumption, they encourage us to think even more closely about how to eat plants. Responding to this need for more ethical forms of plant flesh consumption, Marder suggests that “ethical eating demands that we respect plant communities, paying attention to both the methods of their cultivation and their reproductive possibilities.”[[317]](#footnote-317) In *Semiosis*, Stevland’s narration and plant communication grants us access to the needs and desires of plants; when these needs and desires are met, Pax’s plants readily provide their flesh. However, as conflict breaks out between the humans and another animal, the Glassmakers, on Pax, the plants’ harvesting cycles are disrupted, and they express their acrimony through chemical communications with Stevland:

Tulips are also angry. As are pineapples. Cotton. Wheat. Lentils. Others. They expect to be respected and cared for, but they understand that their animal allies have been subject to predation. The seed potatoes that you planted in the upriver sandy bottomland are complaining to me as we speak because they are being harvested before they can create a new generation.[[318]](#footnote-318)

After years of mutualism, involving nourishment, cultivation, and harvesting, Pax’s plants feel the absence of the humans’ assistance from root to tip. However, as they witness the familiar threat of predation, they afford the humans leniency—more than anyone on Pax, the plants have experienced the violence and exposure of total instrumentalization that emanates from predation. As we consider the plants’ complaints, alongside their understanding, they highlight some ways that we can attend to methods of their cultivation and reproduction that are in their best interests: ““help me,” “prune me,””[[319]](#footnote-319) and harvest my flesh when it is ripe. Importantly, Stevland adds, ““they complain,” I continue, “but they are unable to act.””[[320]](#footnote-320) While Stevland’s statement most clearly expresses the plants’ reliance on their mutualistic relationship with the humans, it also reifies the need for humans to proceed from a position of ontological freedom[[321]](#footnote-321) regarding plants. Without Stevland, the other plants are unable to tell the humans what they need or want; therefore, it is in the best interests of the plants that we respect the other potentialities that exist outside of their identity as our food. [[322]](#footnote-322) When we proceed from this position of ontological freedom, we understand that we need “to grow not *against* but *together with* the environment, including other human beings, animals, and plants!”[[323]](#footnote-323)

*Semiosis*’ speculative flesh ecology cultivates mutualistic relationships and explores forms of plant consumption that proceed from the indistinct positions of ontological freedom and ethical possibility. As the humans and Stevland build these mutualistic relationships for a better future on Pax, they engage in moments of vulnerable exposure, they risk their own flesh in service of indistinct possibilities. As Lucille comments, “I felt really small when I looked at the fields and forests all around us. What if all the plants decided they didn’t like us? They knew what to do.”[[324]](#footnote-324) As she surveys the arboreal landscape, Lucille is keenly aware of Pax’s plants’ capabilities, acknowledging that their dissatisfaction or resentment could result in the humans’ destruction. Lucille and the other humans could easily end up like the three original women colonisers: poisoned, consumed, and fertilised. However, as the humans’ mutualistic relationship with Stevland demonstrates, through risk, they plant a new path of ontological freedoms and ethical possibilities that emerge, like grafts, from these moments of semi-forgotten violence and exposure, from time dwelling in the zone of indistinction.

## ***Our* Green Planet**

The speculative flesh ecology of *Semiosis* propagates a form of indistinction between plant and human flesh that encourages us to witness plant instrumentalization differently and reconsider the ontological identity and ethical positionality of plants. The novel imagines alternative multi-species relationships, like mutualism, that address the troubling and inevitable need to consume. Reading these moments of violent instrumentalization through Marder’s concept of grafts provides another way of witnessing plant flesh consumption. Through grafts, the novel highlights that the initial, subtle, and semi-forgotten violence of plant flesh consumption is necessary for crafting the indistinction between flesh that follows. The cultivation of mutualism, read with plant capabilities, communication, and community, highlights the ethical relationships borne from striving towards a future of living *together with* plants, rather than one based solely on instrumentalization. Finally, through Marder’s considerations of how to consume ethically, we can see how the novel encourages us to consider the needs of plants, whereby we respect their other potentialities that are not confined to their identity as our food source. Therefore, *Semiosis*’ speculative flesh ecology highlights that consuming and existing with plants does not necessitate total instrumentalization; instead, humans can learn, from plants, how to live *together with* one another, viewing grafts and mutualism as routes to indistinction.

*Semiosis* provides us with a different horizon of imagination for plant living that “Green Planet” does not allow us to see. As Stevland allows parts of himself to be consumed by the humans, while actively participating in this multi-species community, he reaches out branches of mutualism towards the real world, prodding us to take up a mutualistic approach to the future of *our* green planet, through *Semiosis*’ speculative flesh ecology. On Pax, giant sequoias would not be starved or poisoned with fire; instead, perhaps, we would plant our dead flesh at their roots, so that they could “tap flesh for food and blood for water.”[[325]](#footnote-325) Vegetable- and fruit-bearing plants would not be wholly instrumentalized for their flesh; they would, rather, be harvested to keep themselves intact and plants would think, “I gave them fruit.”[[326]](#footnote-326) Therefore, as we look towards the future of *our* green planet built on mutualism, we could progress from a genuine universality of *our*, one borne of indistinction. With this mutualistic approach, Marder reminds us that “ontological freedom (letting vegetal beings be) and the inversion of exposure would jointly constitute the enabling limits to eating and to sovereign experiencing. Within these limits dietary ethics would finally be thinkable, albeit never purely achievable.”[[327]](#footnote-327) Like indistinction, then, walking arm in awn with wild oat plant seedlings towards the future of *our* green planet “means we have ethical and ontological work to do.”[[328]](#footnote-328)

*Semiosis*’ botanical speculative flesh ecology imagines violent and exposed flesh enmeshments, strange multi-species communications, and what it means to grapple with the inevitable need to consume. In the next chapter, I develop *Semiosis’* focus on strange multi-species communication through flesh and the power of seemingly pernicious consumptions. Through my analyses of *Pigs* and *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, I explore how their speculative flesh ecologies capture the affective and transformative power of inanimate objects—thing flesh—and the indistinct possibilities which are generated from opening ourselves up to this affective power. As I consider the ontological indistinction and ethical possibilities of thing flesh, I find mutuality in Marder’s expansive approach to moral considerability:

you ask where to draw the line of moral considerability. We should certainly not reject the possibility of respecting communities of bacteria without considering the issue seriously [. . .] It is counterproductive to recreate hierarchies of beings, instead of giving each kind of being its due.[[329]](#footnote-329)

Therefore, as we wade through the waters of the litter-riddled speculative flesh ecologies of *Pigs* and *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, we open ourselves up to the power of thing flesh, which challenges us to rethink the boundaries of ethical consideration, once again—we give all kinds of flesh their due.

# “The Pigs Ate Every*thing*”: Thing Flesh and Vital Materialism in Johanna Stoberock’s *Pigs* (2019) and Wu Ming-Yi’s *The Man with the Compound Eyes* (2011)

## **Plastic Islands**

Caught up in the North Pacific Gyre lies what has been termed the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch (GPGP),” an accumulation of non-biodegradable floating waste and microplastics (marine debris) that litter their contents throughout the Gyre.[[330]](#footnote-330) While, as *National Geographic* notes, “these patches are almost entirely made up of tiny bits of plastic, called microplastics,” the GPGP still invokes “images of an island of trash floating on the ocean.” [[331]](#footnote-331) The cultural imagination of the GPGP intertwines swathes of marine debris with islandic depictions, despite the non-existence of such marine debris islands.

Even though islands *made* of marine debris do not exist outside of the cultural imaginary, islands *infiltrated* by marine debris are an ecological reality. One such island, which bears witness to the entangled relationship of marine debris and islandic reality is Midway Atoll. The atoll lies halfway between North America and Asia, within the GPGP. In rare access to the uninhabited Midway Atoll, American news outlet CNN captured the devastating effects of the GPGP on both the environment and animals, in its short documentary, “Midway: A Plastic Island,”[[332]](#footnote-332) and accompanying article, “Plastic Island: How Our Throwaway Culture is Turning Paradise into a Graveyard.”[[333]](#footnote-333) As images of discarded plastic matter occupy the screen, presenter Nick Paton Walsh details the journey of marine debris, commenting that

your coffee cup, water bottle, toothbrush, may all float miles to end up on these shores, inside these birds, the blubber of these seals, in the sand, and invisibly in the waves these dolphins call home, and eventually these plastics may well end up inside you.[[334]](#footnote-334)

Walsh captures the ubiquitous and harmful nature of marine debris washed up on the atoll’s shores and trapped inside the flesh of the atoll’s animals. The images and scale of the marine debris speak to Stacy Alaimo’s comments that “everyday, ostensibly benign human stuff becomes nightmarish as it floats forever in the sea. The recognition that these banal objects, intended for momentary human use, pollute for eternity renders them surreally malevolent.”[[335]](#footnote-335) The marine debris on Midway Atoll becomes a visual signifier for the nightmarish reality of anthropogenic pollution. In its seeming ubiquity and immortality, we see how this environmental nightmare is one of human creation, one we ourselves have actively contributed towards, and one that will outlive us all. As marine debris continues to multiply—as both a continuous stream of human pollution and as it is broken down into billions of microplastic pieces—it will continue to infiltrate both the environment and the flesh of both humans and animals, often resulting in deadly consequences for the animals who mistakenly consume the debris as food.

From plastic bags to plastic pellets, marine debris becomes a deceptive appetiser for both marine animals and birds. Turtles often mistake deadly plastic bags for delectable jellyfish,[[336]](#footnote-336) and albatrosses mistakenly feed their young with plastic pellets instead of fish.[[337]](#footnote-337) In one very troubling moment of the documentary, a guide opens up the stomach of a recently deceased albatross to reveal a plethora of plastic, including a red coca cola bottle top, noted to be the same colour as squid. The plastic matter pours out of the albatross, as the guide comments, “the carcass lays here, the bones disappear, the feathers disappear, but what will stay are all these pieces of plastic that just litter the ground here.”[[338]](#footnote-338) While the bottle top was once a useful object, it has become a thing capable of killing its fleshy vessel. This deadly vignette of plastic pollution, with its altered states of plastic and flesh, speaks to Nancy Tuana’s thoughts on plastic in hurricane Katrina, whereby, “this commonly found substance has not only transformed our lives, it has transformed our flesh.”[[339]](#footnote-339) Marine debris makes its way from sea to stomach, leaving lasting impressions of fleshy destruction, long after the remnants of animal remains have gone.

Marine debris’ infinite and haunting impressions take on a renewed form in Johanna Stoberock’s novel, *Pigs* (2019), where swathes of marine debris litter an island, providing sustenance, rather than a death sentence, for the island’s six pigs. *Pigs’* island is much like those of Midway Atoll, where rubbish washes in from the sea; its next steps unimportant to those who discarded it. From plastic water bottles to every forgotten great aunt, the island teems with the discarded just waiting to be consumed. However, unlike Midway Atoll, *Pigs*’ island is inhabited, in this case, by four enslaved children named Luisa, Mimi, Andrew, and Natasha, and six rubbish-hungry pigs—

the one with the spots, the one with the lopped off ear, the one whose hooves looked dainty, the one who liked to scratch her side against the fence post, the one who was smaller and skinnier than the rest but who seemed to have the sharpest teeth of all, and the one she always forgot to count.[[340]](#footnote-340)

It is their job to rid the world of its infinite detritus. Not fussed by their food choices,

the pigs ate everything. Kitchen scraps. Bitter lettuce from the garden. Stale and sticky contents of lunch boxes kids brought home from school. Toenail clippings. Hair balls pulled up from the drain. After the pigs were done, there weren't even any teeth left over, not even any metal from cavities filled long ago.[[341]](#footnote-341)

The pigs enthusiastically consume everything that washes up on the island’s shore, consistently playing their part in the island’s fragile speculative flesh ecology. Unlike Midway’s albatrosses, the island’s pigs appear to be mostly unaffected by the continued consumption of the world’s rubbish, delighting and dancing for their meals of marine debris. They appear to be the perfect animal of the Anthropocene: our very own garbage vortices. Barely overseeing this rubbish ridding operation are the “grown-ups,” who saunter about the island in glamourous garments, while terrorising the children with threats of kidnap and consumption. The grown-ups leave the children to fend for themselves, often resulting in the children going without food or injuring themselves, while feeding the pigs. Their sole role on the island is to instil fear in the children, so that they continue to feed the rubbish to the pigs and rid the world of its infinite detritus. After the grown-ups kill and eat one of the pigs (the one with spots), the five remaining pigs, in their dwindled numbers and grieving state, can no longer consume the waste; it piles up on the shores, becoming more hazardous every day. The grown-ups attempt to harm the children, but they—and their pig-whisperer adult, Otis, who the pigs refused to eat after he washed ashore—manage to feed the adults to the pigs. Soon after, Otis and the children release the pigs from their pen, noticing a path of garbage that appears across the ocean. Encouraged by Otis to take the path, the children walk away from the island on steppingstones of rubbish, leaving the five remaining pigs and the castaway pig-whisperer, Otis, to freely roam the island, consuming the world’s detritus as they please.

Wu Ming-Yi’s novel, *The Man with the Compound Eyes (TMwtCE)* (2011, trans. 2014), imagines a different kind of island, one that speaks to the cultural imaginary of the GPGP, with one journalist in the novel commenting that “we’re mainly here because we heard that this is where the trash island might hit [. . .] It’s not really an island. I should call it the Trash Vortex.”[[342]](#footnote-342) Unlike the island in *Pigs*, the island that tribe-exile, Atile’i, finds himself on is an expansive mass of marine debris that ebbs and flows with the current of the ocean. From coloured bags to plastic bottles, Atile’i becomes stranded on the rubbish island, watching as the marine life that encounters it becomes entangled in its endless reach. Much like Midway Atoll, many of the island’s marine animals consume portions of plastic, eating their way towards an untimely death. With death surrounding him on all sides, Atile’i first believes he, too, has died, floating on the “land of death.”[[343]](#footnote-343) However, it appears that he is simply making camp in the GPGP, a sole witness to the endless threat of marine debris. As his plastic island is pushed by the undercurrents towards the shores of Taiwan, watched by the world’s horrified eyes, Atile’i is thrown onto the shores of Taiwan, where he meets Alice, whose home has been battered and submerged by the “trash vortex.” After bridging their communication gap, Atile’i and Alice head into the mountains in search of Alice’s lost son, coming to the realisation that he was dead long before he went on a hike with his father in the mountains—his life was a story Alice continued to imagine for herself. Having helped Alice, Atile’i builds a boat out of wood and marine debris and sets of sailing back to Wayo Wayo, in search of his lost love, Rasula. However, heartbreakingly, Rasula was also washed ashore by the trash vortex, dying shortly after the birth of her and Atile’i’s child, with Atile’i unaware of both her death and his child’s existence. Following a multi-narrative structure, we bear witness to the many lives affected by the GPGP; from the Wayo Wayoan spirit whales to the many shoreline residents of Taiwan, each one has a different story to tell about their experiences with the debris of the ocean.

As the novels explore the ever-increasing presence of marine debris in our oceans, islands, and flesh, they encourage us to reconsider what kinds of matter participate in the speculative flesh ecology and the forms that such participations might take. The rubbish washed-up on the shores of the island in *Pigs* and forming the island in *TMwtCE* affects the animals who consume it, the humans who feed it to them, and the environment they all share. All of these fleshy beings are affected by the marine debris, whether this is a result of radioactive waste causing the children in *Pigs* to lose hair, the dead turtles with indigestible items lodged in their stomachs in *TMwtCE,* or the changing of flesh from micro-marine debris in the islands’ surrounding waters. Rather than simply existing as instrumentalized matter, the rubbish in *Pigs* and *TMwtCE* actively affects the islands and their inhabitants, enmeshing itself into their flesh, either through consumption or contact. In this chapter, I will argue that both *Pigs* and *TMwtCE* encourage us to be open to the participation and affective power of other nonhumans, in the speculative flesh ecology, and the indistinct possibilities—both ontological and ethical—that can be cultivated by opening ourselves up to the affect of other nonhumans. Through my analysis of these novels, their speculative flesh ecologies emerge as a series of fleshy assemblages, where members open themselves up to the affective power of nonhumans, through consumption, touch, and porosity.

## **Vibrant Matter**

How do we grapple with the affective power of marine debris, both real and speculative, when its destructive capabilities are clearly visible? How do we attend to the agentic power of matter that affects humans, nonhumans, and the environment that we all inhabit? Can we, conceivably, continue to see marine debris as ontologically distinct and separate from the flesh that created it, consumes it, and is consumed by it? To answer these questions, we must turn to Jane Bennett and her approach: “vital materiality.” Bennett’s work traces the ways in which we can best attend to the vibrancy and vitality of matter, as being caught up in shared agentic assemblages with both humans and nonhumans. She suggests that vibrant matter can be thought of in terms of “thing-power,” where the aim is to “attend to the *it* as *actant*, [my emphasis]” since “things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power.”[[344]](#footnote-344)

Building on Bennett’s concepts of vibrant matter, thing-power, and agentic assemblages, I suggest that we can perceive matter as “thing flesh,” as being part of a speculative flesh ecology, made up of humans and nonhumans alike. Bennett’s terminology deviates from mine; she opts for “materiality” as her chosen term for humans and nonhumans, since, she comments,

I am a material configuration, the pigeons in the park are material compositions, the viruses, parasites, and heavy metals in my flesh and in pigeon flesh are materialities, as are neurochemicals, hurricane winds, E. coli, and the dust on the floor. Materiality is a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota. It draws human attention sideways, away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans.[[345]](#footnote-345)

While I share Bennett’s view on the ontological potential of vibrant matter, I wish to stress the importance of the thingness and fleshiness of these encounters and assemblages. The term thing flesh bears two concurrent meanings: 1) the inextricable relationship between the “things” of the world and the “flesh” of the world, with both interacting in, through, and with one another; and 2) the fleshiness of things, by which things are part of a collective flesh with other fleshy beings (a speculative fleshy ecology), with each possessing the power and agency to affect and transform one another. These two concurrent meanings demonstrate both the complexity and the vitality of thing flesh’s role in the speculative flesh ecology.

To further illustrate the rationale of thing flesh, I will address the two components of thing flesh—thing and flesh—and explore how they interact with one another. The concept of things, stemming from Bill Brown’s “thing theory,” stresses the power and agency that emerges from an object asserting itself as a thing. As Brown comments,

We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.[[346]](#footnote-346)

Objects become things, then, when they deviate from their constructed purpose and assert themselves as some*thing* outside of the normalised human perception. In doing so, things are shown to possess a transformative power that departs from the category of the object, one that has the ability to affect those around them. However, despite Brown’s focus on the human subject, things do not solely transform the human; instead, they have transformative powers over other fleshy beings, too. Brown goes on to quote Bruno Latour, stating that ““things do not exist without being full of people” and that considering humans necessarily involves the consideration of things.”[[347]](#footnote-347) The fullness of things that Latour articulates brims with consume(r/d) connotations, revealing the intrinsic relationship between things and their ability to consume and be consumed. These consumable connotations not only express the “thinginess” of things, but they also capture the “fleshiness” of thing flesh, revealing a valuable mode of consumable interaction between thing flesh and other kinds of flesh. Thing flesh’s consumption also helps to depart from the centralisation of the human subject that both Latour and Brown reference; therefore, we can reframe Latour’s original description: things do not exist without being full of *flesh* and that considering flesh involves the consideration of things. To seal off the boundaries of consideration to only humans and things risks excluding a multitude of other fleshy beings that also inhabit the flesh ecology, where these interactions and considerations occur, such as animals, plants, and the environment. Flesh and its consumable connotations, then, are an intrinsic part of how things exist in the world and how they are able to garner an affective power. Tuana raises another important quality of flesh that is intrinsic to its interactions with things, and, therefore, my notion of “thing flesh,” when she notes “there is a viscous porosity of flesh— my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world.”[[348]](#footnote-348) This fleshy porosity is intrinsic to thing flesh’s affective power in these assemblages. Things take on a fleshy quality, then, when they infiltrate other fleshy beings and environments, like the heavy metals in Bennett’s and the pigeon’s flesh or the plastic lodged inside humans’ and animals’ flesh. Thing flesh acts most powerfully in, through, and with flesh.

Bennett herself alludes to the importance of vibrant matter’s interactions with flesh in confirming matter’s vitality and affective power, when she, too, discusses consumption—both of flesh as food and flesh as matter. Bennett asks, “how, for example, would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash, or “the recycling,” but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter?”[[349]](#footnote-349) Bennett’s contemplative consumptions transform matter into thing flesh, into some*thing* that is capable of affecting other fleshy beings. These affective powers are not always positive, either, with Bennett stressing the dangerous potential of certain kinds of thing flesh—marine debris is called to mind, with its potentially dangerous affective power. She calls for an altogether transformative experience, where we no longer view matter as an object, but as a *thing* with affective power. In doing so, not only does matter transform into thing flesh, but it also pushes us towards further transformative questions about *how, who,* and *why* we consume.

Expanding on the question of *who* is consumed, Bennett considers not only the consumption of thing flesh, but she also delves into the consumption of a broader grouping of fleshy beings, when she asks, “what difference would it make to public health if eating was understood as an encounter between various and variegated bodies, some of them mine, most of them not, and none of which always gets the upper hand?”[[350]](#footnote-350) In thinking about eating as both a hierarchically messy and entangled encounter, Bennett calls attention to the multitudes of beings who become edible flesh, whether they become slices of meat, florets of broccoli, or the plastic packages that contain them. Bennett’s exploration of vibrant matter, then, is not limited to those objects we call materials; instead, it attempts to encompass a whole range of fleshy beings that we encounter and who encounter us in modes of consumption. Furthermore, by acknowledging these questions of consumption, we can begin to understand thing flesh’s affective power in the speculative fleshy ecology. Consumption envelops and expands the interactions between different fleshy beings. We begin to understand the importance of consumption in considering thing flesh’s affective power—consumption leads to equally illuminating and dangerous modes of encounters with thing flesh and fleshy beings more broadly.

Bennett frames this consumption of varied fleshy beings as a question of public health; however, there are equally important ontological and ethical questions that stem from these kinds of consumptions that I will address throughout this chapter. Bennett herself stresses the importance of advocating for a vitality of matter—or thing flesh—since, she notes,

the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even “respect” (provided that the term be stretched beyond its Kantian sense). The figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption.[[351]](#footnote-351)

In advocating for thing flesh as an affective being, then, we open the door to acknowledging a wider range of nonhumans and we begin to understand how our flesh interacts in, through, and with other kinds of flesh, in ways that deviate from the distinct, hierarchical modes of being that humans consistently re-enact. Bennett’s advocation for thing flesh works within the same sphere as Matthew Calarco’s zone of indistinction, where these same distinct, hierarchical modes of being are dismantled, once we acknowledge that we—as fleshy beings—are all flesh and more-than-flesh.[[352]](#footnote-352) Bennett goes on to comment on this more-than-flesh potentiality, where “the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief.”[[353]](#footnote-353) Bennett’s comments, alongside Calarco’s—“their bodies and our bodies can become something more, something beyond the “mere” meat to which the dominant culture tries to reduce them”[[354]](#footnote-354)—capture the importance of engaging with a variety of fleshy beings and advocating for their affective power and inclusion in our shared speculative flesh ecology. Furthermore, Bennett asks, “What if things really can (in an under-determined way) hail us and offer a glimpse, through a window that opens, of lively bodies unparsed into subjects and objects? How does that work?”[[355]](#footnote-355) In hailing us, thing flesh interpellates us into a zone—a zone of indistinction—where we are neither subjects nor objects; instead, we are flesh. Thing flesh, then, has the potential to provide another route of access to the zone of indistinction, one stemming from its affective relationships with other fleshy beings.

However, Bennett is keen to stress that acknowledging and advocating for things “will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression;” instead,

it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself.[[356]](#footnote-356)

These interconnected beings culminate in an equally strong and vulnerable entanglement, where the actions of one—either positive, negative, or a messy in-between—undoubtedly affect the other. In understanding the entangled relationships between indistinct fleshy beings, Bennett hopes to foster a greater sense of kinship, one built on an egalitarian approach to a variety of modes of fleshy existence, where no new sets of exclusions are generated; as Calarco notes, in his connected possibilities of indistinction,

unless we proceed from this kind of generous agnosticism, not only are we bound to make mistakes [. . .], but also we set up the conditions of possibility for the worst kinds of abuses toward those beings who are left outside the scope of moral concern.[[357]](#footnote-357)

It is clear that for both Bennett and Calarco, these spaces of fleshy entanglement—these zones of indistinction—mean, as Calarco notes, “we have ethical and ontological work to do.”[[358]](#footnote-358)

With thing flesh forming the basis of this chapter, I will look at how Stoberock’s novel, *Pigs*, and Wu’s novel, *TMwtCE*, explore the concept of thing flesh, alongside both the affective power that it generates and the indistinct possibilities that arise from viewing thing flesh as a vital part of the speculative flesh ecology. Thing flesh and its discussion in speculative fiction advances our understanding of the speculative flesh ecology in four main ways: 1) thing flesh reiterates the potential for an indistinct and collective encountering of flesh, so that an encounter exacted on one part of the speculative flesh ecology is encountered by it all, as in an assemblage; 2) thing flesh invites us to work through the complexities of affective loss, both personal and environmental, and how this contributes to the construction, maintenance, and participation of and in the speculative flesh ecology; 3) thing flesh highlights that some members of the speculative flesh ecology are more open to the affective power of others; and 4) thing flesh encourages us to see the thinginess of other flesh—human, animal, plant, and inanimate object—and allows us to better understand the role of instrumentalized flesh in the speculative flesh ecology: flesh continues to possess agency and affective power, even after it has been objectified, consumed, and/or discarded.[[359]](#footnote-359) Such speculative imaginings of thing flesh are complimented by Bennett’s own consideration of the speculative story of things, when she describes and writes about an assemblage of things: “the strangely vital things that will rise up to meet us in this chapter— a dead rat, a plastic cap, a spool of thread— are characters in a speculative onto-story.”[[360]](#footnote-360) This “speculative onto-story” becomes one of Bennett’s main examples to highlight

the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other. One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world.[[361]](#footnote-361)

Speculative stories, then, whether Bennett’s, Stoberock’s, or Wu’s, are not only tied to the ontological explorations of thing flesh, but they are also sites for understanding the indistinctions that arise from seeing how all beings act in, through, and with thing flesh in the speculative flesh ecology. If, as Bennett notes, “the ethical task [of the vital materialist] at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it”[[362]](#footnote-362) and to “distribute value more generously, to bodies as such,”[[363]](#footnote-363) then, the fleshy characters of *Pigs* and *TMwtCE*, both human, animal, plant and thing, attempt to do just that, opening themselves up to the affective power of thing flesh and becoming indistinct in their shared speculative flesh ecologies.

Bennett notes that “vital materialists will thus try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them.”[[364]](#footnote-364) Both novels afford us a space to linger in these moments of thing flesh fascination and draw out the ontological and ethical considerations necessary for a “strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side [that] may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans — animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities— more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically.”[[365]](#footnote-365) By creating these moments of lingering consideration, the novels allow us to think about these “strange commonalities” between all kinds of flesh. They draw on causes that unify the experiences of flesh—such as the proliferation of marine debris and the climate crisis—in order to reify the affective power of thing flesh and its role in the speculative flesh ecology. Furthermore, both Stoberock and Wu utilise the speculative fiction genre, to complicate the hierarchical distinctions between humans and nonhumans, imagining fantastical moments of multi-flesh communication that illuminate the affective power of even the most unlikely of thing flesh beings. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes, speculative fiction has long been used to “investigate matter’s agency, revealing its invitations to find in the ordinary a capacity to astonish.”[[366]](#footnote-366) As such, the novels consistently provide banal, everyday objects the lingering space necessary to be considered thing flesh, where their affective power on the humans, animals, and environments they interact with is constantly explored and developed. The speculative explorations of thing flesh are crucial in drawing out the indistinct potentialities between all kinds of flesh in the islands’ speculative flesh ecologies; as Bennett notes, “what other affinities between us and them become apparent if we construe both us and them as vibrant matter?”[[367]](#footnote-367)

## **Becoming Part of the Island**

*One island*

*One ship*

*One trail of refuse*

*One body of water*

*One lost boy.*[[368]](#footnote-368)

In an imaginative exercise, Bennett asks her reader to

picture an ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations between human, animal, vegetable, or mineral. All forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively, affective, and signalling. And so an affective, speaking human body is not radically different from the affective, signalling nonhumans with which it coexists, hosts, enjoys, serves, consumes, produces, and competes.[[369]](#footnote-369)

What Bennett conjures up, here, is the image of the agentic assemblage, making apparent the potential for a variety of affective relationships between each of its members, unhampered by species identity. As though listening to Bennett’s instructions, both Stoberock and Wu picture these agentic assemblages in their novels. Their speculative fiction novums create the perfect insular conditions for both *Pigs* and *TMwtCE* to illustrate and encounter agentic assemblages; they are “living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within.”[[370]](#footnote-370) The islands team with life and liveliness, a constant stream of marine debris providing both sustenance and sickness. The arrival of such marine debris on the shores and shallows of the islands signals the persistent presence of energies that Bennett notes as being part of an agentic assemblage. As Bennett comments further, “in this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.”[[371]](#footnote-371) The marine debris becomes thing flesh, constantly being reperceived and transformed, alongside its affective relationships with the other fleshy beings in the island’s agentic assemblage.

The island in *Pigs*, where all the world’s detritus is dumped, is seemingly imperceptible to the outside world, its practices discarded for the peace of mind of passers-by, despite its complex and dynamic agentic assemblage. In one of the many short intervals which attempts to detail the island’s environment—known as, what I shall term, the “From a Distance” chapters—it is noted that,

From time to time passengers gathered on deck to sigh at the dark outline the island made against the orange setting sun. But nobody noticed the trails of refuse that formed a path over the water as the ship steamed on. It was official policy never to look back. It was official policy to believe the world stopped once it could no longer be seen.[[372]](#footnote-372)

The ship’s passengers regard the island, but this is only inasmuch as it obscures their view of the sunset; its ambiguous outline disrupting their picturesque pleasure cruise. Through this small inconvenience, the island affects the passengers and forces them to acknowledge its existence—even if only momentarily. However, such affect is shallow, since the island is viewed and made sense of only through the context in which the passengers—or human subjects—have set for it, its agentic assemblage and mass of things unintelligible. Despite their apathy towards the island, the thing flesh creates a path of itself from the boat to the island, inviting the rubbish-dumping passengers to become part of the agentic assemblage, leaving behind their anthropocentric subjectivity and the capitalist comfort of the ship. As this path of marine debris makes its way towards the island, their introduction into the island’s agentic assemblage begins, transforming from objects into things; their thing flesh attended to by both the frustration and wonder of the children and the hungry mouths of the pigs. Despite the thing flesh’s pathed invitation, the passengers choose not to become part of the agentic assemblage; rather than a thing flesh road, their marine debris remains an assortment of discarded objects. Becoming part of the agentic assemblage would involve attending to, affecting, and being affected by thing flesh, like the children and the pigs; therefore, the passengers adhere to the “official policy,” with any residual guilt floating away with their infinite detritus, to be sorted and consumed by the island’s inhabitants. The passengers prefer to believe that the island is but a dark outline, a banal blotch on the landscape, “always, it was just out of focus.”[[373]](#footnote-373)

Despite this “official policy” the island’s agentic assemblage is sometimes able to signal to and affect the passengers, pushing forth its distinctive smell, long after the ship has sailed away. As Stoberock writes,

From a distance, when the wind was just right, the smell of garbage crept along the edge of the entire world. From a distance, everyone said they prayed the island would remain in place forever, but even from a distance, everyone secretly hoped it would sink into the sea.[[374]](#footnote-374)

The island’s activities and lively thing flesh are made noticeable, through the smells of the accumulative garbage, the “official policy” disrupted by the undeniable smelly signifier. The smell expresses the multiplicities of the “vivid entities” that make up the agentic assemblage, spreading its way around the world, from shore to snout, alerting each rubbish-dumping human to its continued presence; not allowing them to turn away forever. Therefore, in these moments of smelly signification, the island’s agentic assemblage expresses itself in ways that are “not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them,”[[375]](#footnote-375) its smell enduring much to the distaste of the world. Despite the lively and potent aroma, the entire world hopes that the island, its inhabitants and their detritus, will simply sink away from sight and smell, where its garbage fuelled remnants cease to visually and olfactorily infiltrate their environments. However, we know that even with the populace’s wishes, marine debris would not simply disappear; instead, it would continue to break down, finding new ways to make its presence known as it moves into their environments and flesh through smaller particles like microplastics.

The entire world views not only their detritus as magically disposable, but also the humans and nonhumans who inhabit the island. To them, they are simply a mass of garbage, nothing more than “mere objects,” who attempt to signal reminders of their enduring presence. However, unlike the rest of the world, the children do not adhere to the “official policy,” believing, instead, that “what was discarded was unique. Who discarded it was not.”[[376]](#footnote-376) To them, the rest of the world are simply detritus creators, homogenous in their actions to discard their rubbish and turn a blind eye to both the consequences and the signalling of the island’s agentic assemblage. Unlike the homogeneity of the rest of the world, each individual piece of marine debris is attended to, reperceived as thing flesh, and plays a part in the agentic assemblage, affecting the humans and nonhumans who encounter it. Mimi, one of the island’s children, expresses her understanding of thing flesh’s affective power, when she comments,

The world puts its crap out in a bucket on the street for Monday's pickup and it says that's the same thing as making it disappear. But it never disappears. All that crap ends up on this island, and we're nothing more than universal garbage collectors. In a way, you could think of the pigs as transformed garbage. They get bigger and bigger and bigger, but they can't go away. Imagine what would happen if they did.[[377]](#footnote-377)

As Mimi acknowledges, the debris that washes ashore never disappears; instead, it is attended to and transformed by the inhabitants of the island, becoming part of the agentic assemblage as thing flesh. Therefore, unlike the rest of the world, the children are left to attend to it, as “universal garbage collectors,” their invisible labour helping to transform it from garbage into food for the pigs to eat. The pigs further this attention, as endless vortices, transforming the food into energy to feed their own flesh. They become, as Mimi notes, “transformed garbage,” equally affecting and affected bythe thing flesh on the island. Thing flesh’s affect, then, has been transformed through its consumption, existing not only as an infinite polluter, but as an infinite food source for the pigs, too. These moments of thing flesh consumption capture how flesh—both thing, pig, and human—is open to these transformative affective powers. In the island’s agentic assemblage, then, marine debris is “not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them;”[[378]](#footnote-378) instead, marine debris is transformed into thing flesh, as it enters the island, its transformative affective power forming multiple identities and relational states of being.

Once thing flesh has entered the island and been consumed by the pigs, it continues affecting other fleshy beings on and around the island—its affective power manifesting outside of human contexts. For example, the island’s agentic assemblage extends to the shallows of its shores, with the thing flesh circulating the island (like the thing flesh that makes its way from the ship), inviting other fleshy beings into the agentic assemblage. The thing flesh’s approach, however, is sometimes more sinister than simply creating a path to the island and feeding the pigs. When Otis, a ship-wrecked human and pig-whisperer arrives on the island, his transformation into the agentic assemblage is complex, since he initially rejects the children’s comments about the island and its behaviour, lamenting, “maybe the garbage thing was all in the kids’ imaginations. A lot of the things they said didn’t make much sense.”[[379]](#footnote-379) In his naiveite, Otis recalls Stacy Alaimo’s comments about marine animals and debris: “marine habitats are riddled with radioactive waste, toxic chemicals, plastics, and microplastics, all of which become part of the sea creatures that [. . .] lack the means to discern danger, and the impermeability that would exclude it.”[[380]](#footnote-380) Like the marine animals, Otis, too, lacks the ability to discern danger (despite the advantage of being forewarned by the children), and willingly enters into an ocean disproportionately riddled with waste. As such, ignoring the children’s warnings about the island’s surrounding waters—“it might feel good at first, but it’ll get you”[[381]](#footnote-381)—Otis makes his way into the sea, where he encounters an assemblage of things that, while, at first, seem banal—a plastic fork, a barbie doll missing a left arm, and a thimble monopoly game piece—quickly reveal their toxic and malevolent effect on his flesh. Like Alaimo’s marine animals, the thing flesh becomes part of Otis’ flesh:

The sting spread to his leg where she'd nudged against him in the first place. He felt like throwing up. [. . .] He ducked underwater and when he surfaced his head was itching. Not just itching. It was like a nest of ants had colonized his scalp. And his beard. And between his toes. [. . .] The feeling that he needed to throw up had turned to actual retching in the water. [. . .] The pain turned to something else by the time the water was shallow enough that he could touch the bottom. It was like each spot on his body was filled with the kind of pain that comes when you cry: an aching, throbbing kind of pain that leaves the surface of your skin and finds channels to your heart and then leaves your heart and pumps grief back out all the way to every edge you have.[[382]](#footnote-382)

In his encounters with the thing flesh in the water, Otis initially tries to rationalise the pain he is feeling, noting “there must have been something on the hard plastic body,”[[383]](#footnote-383) like a chemical coating, highlighting, once again, this shared inability to discern the danger of the things themselves. However, as each new piece of thing flesh encounters his own, it becomes clear that these visceral effects stem from the affective power of the things themselves, rather from any added substances—transforming, in Otis’ understanding, from marine debris to thing flesh. With this understanding, the descriptions of the things transform, too, shifting from passive garbage to active thing flesh. Both the plastic fork and the barbie doll take on the agentic affect of the assemblage, as they “nudged” [[384]](#footnote-384) against Otis’ limbs, no longer simply garbage to be seen but agentic thing flesh to affect and be affected. Even as Otis attempts to escape from their touch, more thing flesh finds him, helped along by the ocean’s waves, which support this agentic assemblage of thing flesh. The painful affect of the thing flesh in the agentic assemblage spreads throughout Otis’s flesh, making its way from his leg to his heart, and remains long after his initial encounter. This lingering pain transforms from a physical affect to a psychological one, as Otis recalls the sting becoming an all-consuming experience of grief—a loss emanating from thing flesh. Such dual affect speaks not only to thing flesh’s affective power, but it also signals the duality of the transformation that emerges from these affects. Thing flesh, itself, having transformed from marine debris and before transforming Otis’ flesh, demonstrates the interconnection of thing flesh’s affective power—even in its most malevolent form, flesh can undergo an indistinct transformation. This transformative experience, then, recalls Tuana’s comments on the porosity of flesh and PVC, where “the viscous porosity of our bodies and that of PVC allow for an exchange of molecules, where PVC and phthalates pass through the porosity of skin and flesh, particularly the mucosal linings of our intestines and our lungs. Plastic becomes flesh.”[[385]](#footnote-385) It is in these moments, when thing flesh infiltrates other flesh—acting in, through, and with other flesh—that it takes on a renewed fleshiness, transforming other fleshy beings with its affective power.

In *TMwtCE*, Atile’i finds himself tangled with a floating mass of marine debris in the GPGP, after being sent away from his home island, Wayo Wayo, on a raft. In his attempts to rationalise the mass, Atile’i deduces that it, too, must be an island:

After coming to his senses Atile’i found that he really was beached on an island. Apparently boundless, the island was made not out of mud but of a multi-hued mishmash of strange stuff, and there was a weird smell hanging in the air.[[386]](#footnote-386)

Like other marine mammals, Atile’i thinks he has become stranded on the shores of an island; however, he is caught up between bottles and bags rather than sand and stone. The borders of the island seep into the sea around it, becoming further reminders of the island’s strange formation. The island’s composition continues to confuse Atile’i; the only island he has ever known—his home island of Wayo Wayo—was made out of organic matter, its collections comprising of seashells rather than plastic pods. On Wayo Wayo, Atile’i comments, “all things imitated one another: the island imitated the sea turtle, the trees imitated the clouds, and death imitated birth, so that everything was more or less the same.”[[387]](#footnote-387) This organic mimicry, inherent to Wayo Wayo, stands in sharp contrast to the tangled mess of manufactured marine debris; one island is in a constant state of organic renewal, while the other appears to be in a stagnant state of fabricated infinity. However, both islands share the ability to produce environments where “everything was more or less the same,” where everything becomes indistinct. Like the island in *Pigs*, Atile’i’s rubbish island is not simply a “mishmash of strange stuff;” instead, it is an assemblage, where “*objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.”[[388]](#footnote-388) Atile’i himself confirms this thinginess, when he names his new island Gesi Gesi, “meaning a place covered in incomprehensible *things* [my emphasis].”[[389]](#footnote-389) The Gesi Gesi moves with the lively flows of the ocean; its borderless shores constantly growing as more things become entangled in the mass. This free-floating assemblage has become “lively, affective, and signalling.”[[390]](#footnote-390)

The Gesi Gesi attempts to bring Atile’i into its agentic assemblage, through moments of consumption; Atile’i, both physically and figuratively, becomes part of the island, part of the agentic assemblage. When he first arrives, Atile’i explores his new surroundings:

This must be the afterlife, Atile’i thought. He walked all over the island, discovering that most parts of it were none too firm. Some spots were quite spongy, like traps. Sometimes you could sink to a depth of several grown men or so before rising up again.[[391]](#footnote-391)

The estrangement to his new environment causes Atile’i to believe that he has died, entering into an altogether transcendent plane of existence, where things do not behave like they did on Wayo Wayo. As Atile’i explores the Gesi Gesi’s surface, thing flesh (rather than fish) laps at his flesh, tasting him—like Otis, in *Pigs—*before swallowing him whole; the Gesi Gesi’s scale becoming ever clearer the deeper Atile’i is swallowed by its spongy, mouth-like traps. The island’s spongy texture oozes a haptic fleshiness, which, alongside its consumption of Atile’i, encapsulates the fleshiness of the things that make up the agentic assemblage. The Gesi Gesi has, all at once, saved him from death by drowning and invited him into “the cemetery of all creation,”[[392]](#footnote-392) where he must learn to navigate an infinitely expanding landscape, with little knowledge of the things that he walks upon. Atile’i has become one of many fleshy things caught up in the GPGP who are left to enact the endless and alternating flows of consumption.

These moments of endless and alternating flows of consumption are important for Atile’i’s transformation into the agentic assemblage, both physically and psychologically, as he comes to terms with his new environment. It becomes clear to Atile’i that the transformation of every fleshy being in the Gesi Gesi is tied to one another:

creatures that died from eating bits of the island eventually became part of the island. Atile’i thought he too might end up becoming part of the island. So this is what hell was like, he thought. So this is the land of death.[[393]](#footnote-393)

On seeing the decaying fleshy bodies of the marine animals, Atile’i understands that there is a clear progression from consuming parts of the Gesi Gesi’s thing flesh to being consumed by the Gesi Gesi’s assemblage, becoming one piece of thing flesh among many. In death, then, the flesh of the animals becomes an explicit visual signifier of their place in the Gesi Gesi’s agentic assemblage. They, like the marine debris before them, have been transformed into thing flesh, provided with a renewed ability to affect and be affected by other fleshy beings, since as Erica Fudge notes, animals transformed into objects “true things, in terms of thing theory—themselves possess transformative power over humans.”[[394]](#footnote-394) However, what Atile’i fails to recognise, at this moment, is that the living phases of these deceased animals, like him, were already a part of the Gesi Gesi’s agentic assemblage. As soon as they came into contact with the assemblage’s shores and surfaces—were “nudged” and swallowed by thing flesh—they had “become part of the island.” From first contact in the Gesi Gesi’s surrounding waters, their flesh had already undergone a moment of transformation into the agentic assemblage, their porous nature infiltrated by traces of thing flesh, where they continued to affect and be affected by the thing flesh that acts in, through, and with their own. Furthermore, “creature” and Atile’i alike, there are no distinctions between the fleshy beings who can get caught up in the Gesi Gesi and become part of the agentic assemblage: thing, plant, animal, or human. They all become part of the assemblage through modes of consumption and transformation, their flesh affecting and affected by the thing flesh that surrounds each of them.

The affective power of the Gesi Gesi is not always physical; instead, similar to Otis’ transformation in *Pigs*, Atile’i’s own transformation is often painful, with his encounters ending in moments of despair—there is a psychological affect that combines with the physical:

[The people of Wayo Wayo] were intent on forgetting him, trying not to remember. The thought made Atile’i feel that death would be easier. It was like he had been imprisoned in a world so much larger than the only one he had ever known, like a terrible silent punishment had been imposed upon him.[[395]](#footnote-395)

Despite being separated by oceans and cultures, the Wayo Wayoans and the passers-by in *Pigs* are united in their desire to discard things in the ocean that they no longer have a use for. Like the passers-by of *Pigs’* island, the Wayo Wayoans actively try to forget Atile’i; he, like the rubbish of the Gesi Gesi, has been discarded, his flesh left to float around the sea in the hopes that he will be lost forever. This realisation, facilitated by his transformation into the Gesi Gesi, creates an indistinct grief experienced by each being of the Gesi Gesi—human, animal, and thing alike—longing to return to their original homes, away from the ubiquitous presence of the GPGP. However, Atile’i understands that like the other animals and things enmeshed in the Gesi Gesi, he, too, will float infinitely on the ocean’s surface, with bits of his flesh breaking down further to spread among the Gesi Gesi. As Stoberock reminds us, “it was a misunderstanding that anything was lost forever. It was a misunderstanding that anything ever really disappeared.”[[396]](#footnote-396) Like Atile’i, the thing flesh in the ocean will continue to entangle with other fleshy beings, affecting them for eternity as it moves in, through, and with them.

As the Gesi Gesi rides an enormous wave towards the shores of Taiwan, Atile’i is swept along with the masses of thing flesh, where his part in the agentic assemblage is confirmed:

Then a great force flooded in from behind. Sensing the approaching of a huge wave, he went promptly limp and let himself get tossed about. Atile’i clearly saw that the wave was pushing him towards land, and all around him were the strange things from the island. Underfoot and underarm, behind his back and before his eyes, Atile’i was wrapped up in a mixture of shore and sea, as if he was just another piece of the island.[[397]](#footnote-397)

In consuming Atile’i, the Gesi Gesi is careful to ensure that he remains trapped within the island’s agentic assemblage, with his own flesh becoming indistinct from the thing flesh tendrils surrounding him—he too is one of those “strange things from the island.” His indistinct transformation—like those of the other animals around him—highlights flesh’s haunting ability to decay and power to transform. Like in *Pigs*, this indistinction, where Atile’i fully becomes a “piece of the island,” is confirmed when, like Otis, he is submerged in the ocean, utterly surrounded by thing flesh that nudges into his flesh on all sides. All at once, Atile’i begins to accept his place in the agentic assemblage—as another piece of thing flesh able to affect and be affected by the other fleshy beings surrounding him—while also using the power of the assemblage to reach land and escape the grief of the Gesi Gesi. As his body goes limp and he allows himself to be carried by the current, he gives into the power of the agentic assemblage completely, hoping that he and the other “strange things” will be nudged onto new shores. It is Atile’i’s choice of acceptance, rather than resistance, regarding his place in the Gesi Gesi and his willingness to be carried by the wave, that allow him to reach Taiwan’s shores safely.

Throughout *TMwtCE,* the agentic and affective power of the Gesi Gesi is made clear with its power culminating in its consumption of Atile’i’s home island of Wayo Wayo. Wayo Wayo once represented a strong and organic opposition to the floating artifice of the Gesi Gesi; however, the island is quickly overwhelmed by the force of the Gesi Gesi and its accompanying tsunami, where it, too, “becomes part of the island,” consumed and transformed like Atile’i and the animals before it:

A great gash opened up deep in the trench, and a shock wave was transmitted towards the two ends, raising a tsunami of unprecedented power. Of iron will, that wave pushed another piece of the Trash Vortex towards Wayo Wayo. In three minutes and thirty-two seconds, it would, like a gargantuan carpenter’s plane, peel away everything on the island, the living and non-living, into the sea.[[398]](#footnote-398)

In great swathes, layers of Wayo Wayo’s flesh are removed by the carpenter’s blade motion of the tsunami and the Gesi Gesi. Like the blade peels away plant flesh from wood, the tsunami peels flesh away from the island—both living and non-living—forcing them to become another part of the Gesi Gesi. During its watery consumption by the Gesi Gesi, a new agentic assemblage of Wayo Wayo is made clear—one composed of human, animal, plant, and thing—where “every*thing* on the island—the houses, the shell walls, the *talawaka*, the beautiful eyes, the woeful calluses, the salt-heavy hair, and all the stories about the sea—was consigned to oblivion in a heartbeat [my emphasis].”[[399]](#footnote-399) For a renewed brief moment, thing fleshes are exposed to one another, becoming “lively, affective, and signalling,”[[400]](#footnote-400) even as they are flung into the sea. As such, whether solid structures or intangible memory, they take on a renewed affective power as things, where they form new relations with one another: beautiful eyes nudge against shell walls, salt-heavy hair wraps around the *talawaka*, and woeful calluses tread water surrounded by stories about the sea. Each of these fleshy beings becomes some*thing* new, transformed into thing flesh, through their incorporation into the Gesi Gesi; therefore, these consumable interactions reiterate the fleshiness of things, since things, both Gesi Gesi and Wayo Wayoan, act in, through, and with other forms of flesh, when they are caught up in the agentic assemblage.

In both *Pigs* and *TMwtCE*, becoming part of the island, part of an agentic assemblage, captures the potentiality of an indistinct and collective encounter of flesh—whether this encounter is violent, welcomed, or actively forgotten—so that all fleshes can be transformed and “become lively, affective, and signalling.” [[401]](#footnote-401) In their island’s agentic assemblages, they each experience the affective power of the other, with fleshy and consumable descriptors characterising these moments. Thing flesh asserts itself as an affective member of the novels’ speculative flesh ecologies and poses an interesting question: who might be most open to thing flesh’s affective power?

## **She Felt Like She was Eating the World**

*One short-sighted little girl*

*One pair of glasses*

*One mottled piece of tree bark*

*One piece of floating coral*

*One twig to draw pictures*.[[402]](#footnote-402)

Bennett has suggested that some fleshy beings, like hoarders, may be more open to thing flesh’s affective power. She notes that “because the hoarder’s body forms unusually resilient, intense, and intimate bonds with nonhuman bodies, she may have broader access to thing-power, access from the inside out, so to speak.”[[403]](#footnote-403) These hoarder-thing relationships, then, are forged through fleshy interactions, where the hoarder’s flesh becomes more open to the affective power of thing flesh—both by *affecting* and being *affected* by it. Bennett refers to these hoarder-thing communications as “the call of things,” where the hoarders “conjoin with them, play with them, respond to them.”[[404]](#footnote-404) It seems that these fleshy hoarder-thing relationships manifest through a variety of forms, oftentimes oscillating between serious and playful modes of interaction.

Like Bennett’s hoarders, *Pigs’* children and *TMwtCE*’s 15-year-old Atile’i; their childlike-adults, Otis (*Pigs*); and their playful animal cohabitants, the pigs (*Pigs*), too, hear “the call of things,” repeatedly involved in modes of affective interaction with both thing flesh and the other fleshy beings who inhabit their islands and surrounding waters. These childlike qualities of thing flesh link both to the “playful” modes of hoarder-thing flesh relationships and to the speculative possibilities of interacting in, through, and with flesh. As Bennett notes,

Thing-power perhaps has the rhetorical advantage of calling to mind a childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not. It draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve. Thing-power may thus be a good starting point for thinking beyond the life-matter binary, the dominant organizational principle of adult experience.[[405]](#footnote-405)

As such, childhood experiences and attentions to “the call of things,” which stem from thing flesh, not only encourage thinking beyond the adult experience, as Bennett notes above, but they also encourage thinking beyond the human experience, too. In these assemblages of fleshy beings, seen through this “call of things” perspective, there exists none of the clear distinctions between beings, typically held in adult/human perspectives; instead, the “call of things” perspective contributes to the ongoing opening up of flesh to the affective power of thing flesh, working across species boundaries. Therefore, both *Pigs* and *TMwtCE*, with their “call of things” characters, aim to encourage indistinct modes of existence in their speculative flesh ecologies, as they make sense of the seemingly imperceptible depths of thing flesh’s affective power.

Resembling the thing flesh cluttered houses of the hoarders, *Pigs*’ children and *TMwtCE*’s Atile’i, too, are surrounded by hordes of thing flesh, transported to them by the GPGP (Bennett herself uses the GPGP as “an example of a more collective hoard”).[[406]](#footnote-406) Their lives are spent either shovelling marine debris into the mouths of the six hungry pigs or floating on an island composed of plastic curiosities. As it makes its way from boat to shore and from discarder to collector, the marine debris no longer exists as an accumulation of objects; rather, marine debris exists as a collection of thing flesh, with each chunk providing multiple affective interactions. As Stoberock states, “what was discarded was unique. Who discarded it was not.”[[407]](#footnote-407) Not only do these words speak to the anonymity of discarded marine debris in our world of over-consumption, but they also speak to the ways in which, unlike the human discarders, both *Pigs’* island inhabitants and the characters in *TMwtCE* display an “extreme perception,” noticing “too much about their things.”[[408]](#footnote-408) To them, the swathes of marine debris are not simply discarded objects; instead, they are hordes of thing flesh.

These ideas of an “extreme perception” to the “call of things” are explored through Luisa, one of the island’s children. She navigates the island in a blur, her environment eluding her as she stumbles to feed the pigs with deteriorating vision—“every day the world seemed blurrier even than it had before.”[[409]](#footnote-409) However, even with her deteriorating vision, Luisa expresses an extreme perception to thing flesh, noticing “too much” about her things. Much to Luisa’s luck, a pair of glasses appear in the hordes of marine debris, inviting her to wear them and relieve herself of her impaired vision. As Luisa tries on the glasses, her experience cultivates an intimate bond with things; she begins to conjoin, play, and respond to the glasses in unexpected ways:

She felt like she was eating the world, staring at it through those glasses—tree bark with its mottled browns and grays [...] She felt like she could gobble up every object with her eyes. She hadn't realized she was so hungry. Why couldn't the world be clear like this forever? A kind of unformed anger at what she'd been missing surged into her throat, and as much as she tried to swallow, she couldn't get it to unstick.[[410]](#footnote-410)

In deliberately edible language, Stoberock captures how Luisa begins to work her way through the new courses on offer, the unique details and imperfections of her environment standing ready to be consumed. In this desire to consume, Luisa’s behaviour mimics that of the pigs, with each object transforming into edible thing flesh—only, instead of consuming them orally, Luisa consumes them visually. Like the pigs, the possibilities of Luisa’s consumption are endless, with the glasses constantly creating new details for her eyes to feast upon. In their transformative power as thing flesh, the glasses make clear sites of recognition that were previously absent, shifting Luisa’s world from one containing outlines of trees to one containing the mottled browns and greys of tree bark. Therefore, in this moment, as one form of flesh enables the transformative and affective power of the other, the indistinction between flesh starts to emerge. The glasses become an extension of Luisa, with one unable to fully function without the flesh of the other. Therefore, while the glasses transform Luisa’s vision, she also affords the glasses this transformation, salvaging them from the masses of marine debris and daring to try them on, to conjoin with them. She takes time to attend to the transformative and affective power of thing flesh, allowing them to become something more than food for the pigs. As Luisa’s vision is brought into sharper detail, the lines between her flesh and the thing flesh become blurred, owing to a fleshy indistinction that emerges from thing flesh’s affective power.

Stoberock encourages us to empathise with Luisa and her affective relationship with the thing flesh glasses. Luisa has been afforded a new perspective of her island environment; an abandoned child provided with a simple joy to view the world around her. However, this new perspective also brings a residual frustration and anger that accompanies her joy. The glasses are all at once transforming her flesh, while permeating deep within it, lodging themselves inside of her and festering into anger. Before using the glasses, Luisa was unaware of the visual delights she had been missing, and, in her words, “she hadn’t realized she was so hungry.”[[411]](#footnote-411) Like the pigs, Luisa discovers that she, too, is a vortex, never satiated by the visual choices on offer, constantly in search of her next meal. Her desire to consume more of the island is permeated by the overwhelming knowledge that these glasses cannot be hers forever; instead, she must feed them to the pigs. The rules of the island (enforced by the adults) stipulate that “*anything that comes ashore goes to the pigs immediately* [. . .]. *Anything that we keep gets taken away. Better to feed it to the pigs first than have it taken away by some other means. Better to surrender voluntarily*.”[[412]](#footnote-412) No matter what kind of thing flesh arrives, how useful it may be, or what affective power it may hold, there is an expectation that it will be fed promptly to the pigs. The island’s rules emulate broader societal expectations, whereby, as Gay Hawkins notes, “humans are not invited to be open to the affective intensities of plastic matter; rather, they are urged to enact their ethical will and eliminate it.”[[413]](#footnote-413) However, despite these expectations and her obligation to “eliminate” the glasses, Luisa *does*, as I have shown, accept an invitation to be open to the affective power of thing flesh, an invitation which originates from thing flesh itself: the “call of things.”

As Luisa prepares for the loss of her glasses, which she has conjoined with, played with, and that have transformed and lodged themselves in her flesh, she experiences a further loss of flesh, one which communicates the intimate bond that she has formed with the thing flesh—a physical consequence of experiencing the “call of things.” As she dangles the glasses over the pen for the spotted pig,

Luisa wasn't looking when the pig jumped and bit her pointer finger off. Its teeth were so sharp that the bite didn't hurt. She turned, and saw the glasses gone, and felt a deep regret for the clarity of her vision before she realized that she'd lost something else [. . .] Luisa stared at the new stump which was just now beginning to well with blood. Something was wrong, but she couldn't quite place what it was. Oh, blood. Oh, another finger. Was this enough to cover the loss she felt? She crammed her skirt around the stump and set off slowly back to the hut, the fuzziness of the world revealed now as flaw, any hope for clarity ground up and buried deep in the spotted pig's stomach.[[414]](#footnote-414)

Luisa experiences not just the loss of the glasses as thing flesh but the loss of her human flesh, too, generating an affective grief which is communicated from Luisa to the glasses, from the glasses to the pigs, and from the pigs to Luisa. It is a cycle of affective experience which must constantly be re-enacted and repeated in accordance with the grown ups’ rules. As such, to experience the “call of things,” in *Pigs*, it seems, is to repeatedly encounter this cycle of affective grief and transformation. As Bennett notes, both hoarder and hoarded object “bears the imprints of the other,”[[415]](#footnote-415) both physically and emotionally, during these cycles of affective grief and transformation. These imprints are captured in all their fleshy glory, as Luisa realises she has lost her finger (notably, after she has started to mourn the loss of her glasses), wondering whether the physical loss of her finger will cover the emotional loss of her vision. Together, with the glasses, the loss of her finger signifies a loss of “pieces of self,”[[416]](#footnote-416) as Bennett notes, since the glasses, along with her finger, have become an extension of her flesh. Speaking of a hoarder friend, Bennett states that discarding objects ““felt like you removed layers of skin.” The hoarded object is like one’s arm, not a tool but an organ, a vital member.”[[417]](#footnote-417) Clearly, there is a fleshy interaction intrinsic to the hoarder’s experience of the “call of things,” one where to reluctantly discard thing flesh is to relinquish a piece of one’s own flesh. Both the glasses and finger—thing flesh and human flesh—become indistinct from one another, transforming into a collective flesh, which constantly acts in, through, and with one another’s flesh, when experienced as the “call of things.”

Bennett notes that after the loss of things, there is a further transformation: “as it flies through the air toward the 1-800-Got-Junk? truck, the vibrant matter morphs into useless trash.”[[418]](#footnote-418) Such a transformation of thing flesh into useless trash is rejected, in *Pigs*, where, instead, thing flesh retains its affective and communicative power, when it is consumed by the spotted pigs—another fleshy being capable of hearing the “call of things.” Like Luisa, the pig hungrily consumes the glasses (and Luisa’s fingers), with her immense appetite comparative to Luisa’s visual feast. Luisa assumes that since the glasses will be “ground up and buried deep in the spotted pig’s stomach,” they will no longer retain their affective power, becoming “useless trash;” however, fragments of her finger and glasses retain their thing fleshiness, as they enter a new agentic assemblage, one which exists inside the spotted pig’s stomach. Their consumption speaks to Gay Hawkins’ comments that “different associations *make present* different material qualities and affects;”[[419]](#footnote-419) while Luisa saw the glasses as having a temporary existence by the island’s rules, their consumption by the spotted pig makes present their enduring nature inside her stomach. After their consumption, they remain within her, adding layers of skin and pieces of self, both physically and affectively. Such eternal presence of thing flesh within the pig’s flesh is confirmed through the pigs’ lack of bodily excretions; they are never shown to create their own waste and, instead, their own flesh morphs and “bears the imprints of the other,”[[420]](#footnote-420) stomachs bulging or skin glowing from radioactive bricks.[[421]](#footnote-421) Unlike Luisa, then, who has to relinquish her glasses and finger, the spotted pig is permitted to retain them; they are kept inside of her, constantly affecting her from within as they float around in her stomach. Therefore, the “call of things” experience acts indistinctly between humans and animals, calling them to consume it, both orally and visually, in order to conjoin, play, and respond to it, even when the consequences appear violent. Both human and animal, Luisa and the spotted pig, are bound by the island’s rule to discard and consume thing flesh, but such a cycle does not stop the affective power of thing flesh; instead, it helps to expose and enhance such power, as it creates new assemblages and relations, imprinting and lodging itself inside flesh.

Atile’i’s Gesi Gesi does not follow the same rules as *Pigs’* island; instead of having a method for discarding the thing flesh that enters it, the Gesi Gesi simply amasses more, generating an even larger hoard. Despite the operational differences between the islands, the affective relationships that develop between thing flesh and the characters open to the “call of things” are notably similar, highlighting the characters’ hoarder relationships, where they feel a deep sense of loss and affection towards their things, forming “unusually resilient, intense, and intimate bonds with nonhuman bodies.”[[422]](#footnote-422) One of the first bonds Atile’i forms in the Gesi Gesi is with a twig (a pen of some kind), which he uses to heal his feelings of loss and isolation:

The pain only eased when he discovered a kind of twig he could use to draw pictures [. . .] Day after day, the greatest foe Atile’i faced was silence. There was nobody on the island to greet him, nobody to praise his swimming technique, nobody to wrestle, and nobody to compete in diving with. But at least with this kind of twig he could draw what he saw and thought.[[423]](#footnote-423)

Like Otis’ grief, in *Pigs*, Atile’i, too, experiences a deep pain, while grieving for his family, his home, and for himself—the Gesi Gesi has seemingly stripped him of every relationship and affective connection he had on Wayo Wayo. However, like Luisa, Atile’i compensates for his loss—the loss of his home and family—by conjoining, playing, and responding to thing flesh, allowing his mind and flesh to be shaped by the twig-pen. The twig-pen becomes the “nobody” that Atile’i longs for, and his playful interactions soon begin to compensate for his loss. Atile’i’s behaviour, once again, echoes those of the hoarder: “the mounds of trash, stacks of paper, collections of jars, etc. somehow compensate, in an unhealthy but not unsatisfying way, for that loss. Hoarding, in other words, is a coping response to human mortality.”[[424]](#footnote-424) Atile’i fills his emotional loss by opening himself up to the affective power of thing flesh, creating new thing flesh (art), to capture his thoughts and feelings, formed of the Gesi Gesi. As he draws, Atile’i adds pieces of his mind to the Gesi Gesi’s hoard, which will exist infinitely within its agentic assemblage—a piece of him will live on as thing flesh, even as his own flesh decays.

Unlike Luisa, Atile’i’ does not have to relinquish his thing flesh immediately, and, instead, he can continue to be affected by it. After drawing with the thing flesh twig-pen on books, Atile’i is invited to transform these interactions into more intimate moments of conjoining, playing, and responding to thing flesh. Instead of writing on a book, he begins to write on his flesh, encouraging his flesh to bear the imprints of the thing flesh:[[425]](#footnote-425)

One day on a whim he started to draw the sights and sounds of the island on his calves, thighs, belly, chest, shoulders, neck and face, as far along his back as he could reach, and even on the soles of his feet. He layered drawing upon drawing like a palimpsest. When the drawings came off in the rain, Atile’i drew new ones.[[426]](#footnote-426)

When he decides to inscribe his flesh with thing flesh on a “whim,” Atile’i is actually experiencing the “call of things,” affectively drawn to more intimately conjoining, playing, and responding to the twig-pen and the thing flesh he draws. As he puts pen to flesh, three fleshy transformations occur: 1) the Gesi Gesi’s collective thing flesh (sights and sounds) is inscribed onto Atile’i’s flesh; 2) the twig’s fleshy nature becomes apparent, as it conjoins with Atile’i’s flesh; and 3) Atile’i’s flesh is transformed into thing flesh, as his flesh becomes a parchment palimpsest. This final transformation works in the same way as the pigs’ consumption of Luisa’s finger and glasses, where Atile’i “bears the imprints of the other,” [[427]](#footnote-427) retaining traces of the Gesi Gesi’s thing flesh, long after his flesh has been washed off and written over, since a palimpsest is, most commonly, a piece of reusable parchment (made from the flesh of animals), where the original writing has been erased—or partially erased—and written over, while “still retaining traces of its earlier form.”[[428]](#footnote-428) Wu’s application of this parchment palimpsest imagery onto Atile’i’s flesh, then, captures how thing flesh becomes intimately indistinct from pieces of the “call of things” characters’ selves, during these affective interactions—thing flesh will leave an infinite and haunting impression on their flesh again and again. Wu reifies this transformation, where Atile’i bears the imprints of the twig-pen, noting “from a distance he did not look like Atile’i any more. He looked more like some other kind of being, like a ghost perhaps, or maybe like a god.”[[429]](#footnote-429) Atile’i has been completely transformed by the traces of thing flesh covering his flesh, becoming an indistinct being who is not clearly identifiable as either living or dead, human or thing.

Atile’i’s experience of conjoining with thing flesh is not isolated to his affective interactions with the twig-pen; rather, he begins to imagine other ways of conjoining with thing flesh and transforming his own, becoming some*thing* not clearly identifiable as either human or thing, in order to preserve his flesh and be reunited with his lost love, Rasula: “Atile’i could only pray, ‘O Kabang, the only one who can dry the sea, even if you have forsaken me, please let my corpse turn into coral and drift homeward for Rasula to find.’”[[430]](#footnote-430) As corpse turns to coral, Atile’i’s flesh would undergo the same transformation as coral polyps, where “each soft-bodied polyp [. . .] secretes a hard outer skeleton of limestone (calcium carbonate) that attaches either to rock or the dead skeletons of other polyps.”[[431]](#footnote-431) In growing their hard exoskeleton, the coral polyps protect their soft flesh from outside vulnerabilities, actively transforming parts of their flesh to extend the life of the rest. Despite being intrinsically conjoined to both their fleshy polyps and to the remains of their species, the exoskeleton of the coral appears more like thing flesh—created by flesh but bearing little of the haptic sensation. Coral’s fleshy structure has long been the site of contestation; as Susannah Gibson asks, “what is a sponge, a coral, a Venus ﬂy-trap, a fossil? These curious objects seem to combine properties from across the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms and blur the lines between them.”[[432]](#footnote-432) Coral, then, can inhabit the classification of animal, plant, or thing—either separately or simultaneously—in the cultural imaginary, depending on its environment. For example, when it is removed from water, the coral’s exoskeleton can be transformed, by humans, into things (like cameos, beads, and jewellery). [[433]](#footnote-433) As such, even after death, coral lives on as thing flesh, continuing to hold affective power, long after its fleshy polyps have decayed. Atile’i’s desire for his flesh to transform into coral, then, stems from this desire to hold an affective relationship with Rasula, even after his fleshy body has died and decayed—a piece of his flesh will live on as thing flesh. Such a need for thing flesh’s longevity is also expressed by hoarders, who, much like Atile’i,

desperately clings to things because metal / plastic / glass / ceramic / wooden objects (what one hoarder terms his “miscellaneous”) *last longer* than human flesh. Their relatively slow rate of decay presents the reassuring illusion that at least *something* doesn’t die.[[434]](#footnote-434)

Both hoarding and Atile’i’s desire to become coral, then, stem from a need to preserve flesh, through conjoining, playing, responding, and even transforming into thing flesh.

Both Luisa, the pigs, and Atile’i hear the “call of things,” forming intimate bonds with their things that encourage indistinct modes of existence in their speculative flesh ecologies. These “call of things” characters explore, more acutely, the affective power of thing flesh, transforming broader thing flesh relationships into more intimate bonds, like those between hoarders and their thing flesh. Through their playful curiosity, the pigs and the children are more open to the affective power of things flesh, desiring to conjoin, play, respond, and even transform into thing flesh. These “call of things” relationships, then, not only reiterate the affective power of thing flesh, but they also capture the varying degree to which this affect is perceived and experienced. If only we, too, can open ourselves up, like Luisa, the pigs, and Atile’i, to hearing and responding to the “call of things,” then we might be able to more clearly perceive and act upon the potentiality of an indistinct speculative flesh ecology, where all fleshes are acknowledged to be able to affect, conjoin, play, respond, and transform one another. As such, the “call of things” characters encourage two further questions about thing flesh relationships: 1) who else might be transformed into thing flesh and what might the consequences of these transformations be? and 2) what other ways are there to consume and be consumed by thing flesh?

## **The Pigs Ate Every*thing***

*One with spots*

*One with the lopped off ear*

*One whose hooves looked dainty*

*One who liked to scratch her side against the fence post*

*One who was smaller and skinnier than the rest*

*One she always forgot to count*

*One infinite mound of thing flesh*.[[435]](#footnote-435)

Erica Fudge’s concept of the “animal-made-object” captures the inseparability of living animal and dead matter, with each possessing agency and holding “an active presence in so-called human culture.”[[436]](#footnote-436) The term carries a dual meaning, which illustrates this inseparability: “1) the *animal-made­* object—the object constructed from an animal; and 2) the animal *made-object*—the objectified animal.”[[437]](#footnote-437) Fudge’s concept, then, can be helpful for thinking about the different affective powers and relationships that emerge from transforming into thing flesh. As such, thinking of the “animal-made-object,” through thing flesh, allows us to understand how the living animal retains and asserts its agency and affective power, when it becomes matter. The living animal does not simply become an inert object; instead, it retains its affective power, becoming thing flesh, which continues to act in, through, and with other forms of flesh, conjoining, playing, and responding to them. As Fudge notes, “a living animal and animal matter are not separate categories. Like subject and object they are utterly intertwined.”[[438]](#footnote-438) Perhaps, then, all flesh has the capacity to transform into thing flesh, asserting its affective power in new ways.

Like Fudge’s “animal-made-object,” animals in *Pigs* and *TMwtCE* express agency and affective power, when they become akin to thing flesh, through their moments as an “object constructed from an animal” and an “objectified animal.” The affective power they hold or experience is often expressed through moments of thing flesh consumption and/or recalcitrance; as Fudge comments, the recalcitrance of the “animal-made-object [. . .] makes it an animal thing.”[[439]](#footnote-439) These moments of consumption and recalcitrance of thing flesh, then, further capture the affective power of thing flesh, since thing flesh not only transforms and affects those they interact in, through, and with, but thing flesh also provides otherwise objectified beings—such as the “animal-made-object”—with a sustained affective presence, through moments of recalcitrance. Since the “animal-made-object” retains an affective presence as thing flesh, they formulate affective and ethical responses from those around them; how might we be affected by the recalcitrant beached whale who sprays down decaying viscera, as children try to collect their bones, or the recalcitrant pigs who decide they do not want to consume the rubbish-riddled old man?

The recalcitrance of the “animal-made-object,” which asserts its affective power as thing flesh, is explored through Alice’s taxidermized stag beetle, in *TMwtCE*. After capturing the stag beetle, Alice meticulously taxidermies them, anesthetising and piercing them, before locking them away in an insect cell with the other “two inmates: a giant Formosan stag beetle and a deep mountain stag beetle.”[[440]](#footnote-440) Through her taxidermy, Alice takes the living animal and transforms them into animal matter, using chemicals and instruments, and displays them as the quintessential “animal-made-object,” whereby they are both a collection piece and an objectified beetle. However, the stag beetle exhibits recalcitrance as the “animal-made-object,” demonstrating its affective power as “animal-made-thing flesh,” when

the newest member of the collection, still pinned in its cell, was slowly rowing its three pairs of legs, like it was in a swimming pool. Maybe because the dose of ether was too small, that bug, brimming with life, had only gone into a temporary coma. Now it was resurrected. Its neighbours were still peacefully impaled, while this tiny deer kept pacing the void, unable to go anywhere.[[441]](#footnote-441)

As Alice watches the reanimated animal—the animal matter made living animal—she recognises that her seemingly meticulous methods have failed to render the stag beetle a “satisfying” “animal-made-object,” since their transformation is not fully complete—their rowing legs unfurling like her taxidermy. The stag beetle is attempting to escape the cell walls, but, confined by a spear through their exoskeleton, their actions become more akin to the affective power of thing flesh; the recalcitrance of their reanimation asserts the “animal-made-object” as thing flesh, as generating affective power, even when they are at their most objectified.[[442]](#footnote-442) Every movement of recalcitrant reanimation serves as a form of affective power for the stag beetle, where they attempt to reassert control over their experience. As such, the constructed peace of the beetle’s situation is undercut with violent realities, with the oxymoronic “peacefully impaled” illustrating the relationship between the “*animal-made* object” and the “animal *made-object*.” While Alice views her collection piece as peaceful, the stag beetle experiences the violence of impalement and captivity, endlessly pacing the liminality of the void. In this liminal state of “pacing the void,” the beetle asserts themself as both animal flesh and thing flesh, as both living animal and animal matter, simultaneously. As Fudge notes, “the persistent presence of the animal in the animal-made-object seems always to defy the objectification which attempts its absenting;”[[443]](#footnote-443) the beetle demonstrates their ability to both retain and transform their affective power, from animal flesh to thing flesh, even after Alice’s failed mutilations.

The stag beetle’s affective power as both animal flesh and thing flesh causes Alice to be affected both emotionally and ethically, as she questions the inner life of the stag beetle and of insects, more widely: “do insects feel pain? Maybe when their relatives or family members are gone, they are oblivious, but when pierced with a size-three insect pin are they really as senseless as we imagine them to be?”[[444]](#footnote-444) The recalcitrant reanimation of the beetle initiates Alice’s own version of Bennett’s “speculative onto-story,” as she begins to confront her affective relationships and ethical position, in light of this new thing flesh assemblage created from the violence of her failed taxidermy. The physicality of her taxidermy coupled with the recalcitrant reanimation draws Alice towards the stag beetle’s physical experience, granting them the physical pain of being pierced, but denying them the emotional pain of being removed from their home and family. Although Alice is affected by the stag beetle, she denies the beetle an affective experience of their own; for her, ethical attention towards the affective experience of the stag beetle ends at physical violence. Furthermore, despite Alice’s crisis of conscience, crucially, Wu does not expand on what happens to the stag beetle; like Alice’s ethical questioning, the reader is left suspended and unanswered.

While the stag beetle’s recalcitrance generates ethical questions for Alice, then, these exist only in the spheres of physical pain and violence to flesh, rather than being coupled with the stag beetle’s interior life and experience of emotional pain. However, there are moments, in *TMwtCE*, that make more explicit connections between the physical *and* emotional affect experienced by the animals who transform into thing flesh, like the whale avatars of Wayo Wayo’s second sons. [[445]](#footnote-445) After sensing the destruction of their home, Wayo Wayo, the whale avatars congregate and start swimming towards land, “hastening towards a certain end.”[[446]](#footnote-446) Their intentions clear, the whales reach the shores of Valparaiso, Chile, beaching themselves and becoming the “animal-made-object”—a spectacle to be studied, photographed, and pilfered for human consumption. However, like the stag beetle, the whales’ actions are recalcitrant, transforming them from the “animal-made-object” into thing flesh, where they retain and express their affective power as thing flesh. Echoing the imprisoned rowing of the stag beetle, the whales’ recalcitrance, too, takes on a disturbing quality for the human onlookers; villagers try to push them back into the ocean, but “the whales, obstinate and resolute, would swim right back on shore.”[[447]](#footnote-447) The beached whales, then, do not act in the way that the villagers anticipate or want, with their bodies actively resisting their aid in a disturbing performance. Pulled back to the sea, while swimming onto the shore, the whales move between the states of living animal and animal matter, animal flesh and thing flesh, before asserting their affective power through their physical recalcitrance as thing flesh; they are “vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them.”[[448]](#footnote-448) As they continue to bury themselves into the sand, the whales’ flesh reasserts their recalcitrance, multiplying into slimy fragments of thing flesh that coat their human onlookers:

The ones that would die first would bloat up under the oppressive sun, decompose and suddenly explode one after another. Their innards would go flying through the humid, stuffy air and spray down like rain on the cetaceanologists, the fishermen, and the children who would have come to gather whale bones.[[449]](#footnote-449)

Like the stag beetle, the whales are perceived as spectacles for display, where scientists come to collect data and children come to “gather whale bones;” each hoping to harvest their desired fragments of the “animal-made-object.” However, these “animal-made-objects” assert themselves, once again, as thing flesh, when they explode, raining down affective viscera onto the flesh of those below. This visceral rain envelops the human onlookers, responding to their desires to categorise, consume, and collect with a shower of affective power. Like the ocean tides, the humans will wash away the physical traces of the whales’ flesh, but these traces will forever linger in their flesh, leaving lasting impressions that bury deeper than the surface of their skin or the sand craters on the beach.

By beaching themselves, the whales, too, are attempting to wash away haunting traces: those of Wayo Wayo’s destruction. Lodged inside their brains, their loss motivates their violent movements, which speak to the wider affective experiences of the Wayo Wayoan whales:

as if they wanted to force memory from their brains, they would hammer the sand with their heads, leaving huge pits on the beach and making a heavy, hopeless monotone that would pass clear on through to the other side of Chile’s coastal mountains, giving the farmers working in the fields pain of the chest.[[450]](#footnote-450)

Once again, the whales’ recalcitrance becomes a disturbing performance, with their hammering heads echoing the beetle’s rowing legs—their bodies immobile and imprisoned, while one part of them reanimates in an attempt to escape. While their actions and motivations trouble their human onlookers, Wu makes clear that the whales’ recalcitrance and self-mutilation is a direct response to grieving for the destruction of their home island of Wayo Wayo and the loss of their families. Their collective response to loss draws inspiration from the affective motivations of actual whales: “the species involved in mass strandings are highly gregarious with very strong social bonds. Thus, whatever other drivers may instigate the event, it is the social bonds of the group that cause them to strand in great numbers.”[[451]](#footnote-451) Through the whales’ intentional stranding and recalcitrance, then, Wu grants the whales (both Wayo Wayoan and other) an affective experience that speaks to their unique motivations and the inner lives of whales more broadly. Therefore, while the stag beetle’s emotional experience was denied to us, with the whales, Wu grants us a glimpse of the inner life that transforms and affects their physical flesh. We are not left to wonder, like Alice, whether the whales are oblivious to losing their families; instead, their loss emanates in volatile movements and haunting songs. As such, unlike the beetle, the whales actively create their own physical prison to facilitate their suicidal desires, piercing their own flesh in place, in order to escape the emotional imprisonment of their grief. As Valparaiso’s land meets whale flesh, the grief-filled memories of Wayo Wayoan land overwhelmed by thing flesh begin to leave the whales’ minds, leaving huge sand craters and echoes of a hopeless monotone. Like Wayo Wayo, these sand craters, these graves in the sand, too, will be washed away by the ocean’s wave—as if they never existed—and littered with marine debris, with only a handful of beings bearing witness to their temporary existence.

Alongside the temporary impressions of the sand graves, another part of the whales’ grief leaves longer lasting impressions on Valparaiso’s inhabitants: their hopeless monotone. As the whales’ grief calls across the coastal mountains, it lodges itself inside the flesh of the farmers, who are, too, making their own pits in the earth, forcing them to experience a physical manifestation of the whales’ loss and bear the traces of their haunting memories, through a “pain of the chest.” The whales confirm their identity as thing flesh, through these transformations, since, as Fudge notes, “true things, in terms of thing theory—themselves possess transformative power over humans.”[[452]](#footnote-452) The whales’ affective power as thing flesh, then, transcends geographical boundaries, demonstrating its transformative reach. Even while stranded on the beach, the whales remain recalcitrant, refusing to allow any of Valparaiso’s residents to escape unscathed. The affective power of the hopeless monotone is amplified, through the experience of a seventy-year-old Swiss cetceanologist named Andreas, who

would kneel down and weep, would actually weep himself to death. His mortal cries would touch the hearts of everyone on the beach, and everyone would join in and cry along with him. Their tears would drip onto the beach, soon to be recovered by the rising tide.[[453]](#footnote-453)

Making his own sand craters, Andreas, too, tries to force memory from his brain—the memory of three hundred and sixty-five whales dying on the shores of Valparaiso. He echoes the hopeless monotone of the whales, through his mortal cries, creating a softer utterance of “a pain of the chest” in the other humans on the beach; this touch mimics the pain created in the farmers by the whales. Each must feel and carry the haunting impressions of the whales’ affective loss, their hearts aching in rolling succession. As the sea accepts the collective grief of the humans, these salt water tears continue to be passed from one being to another, each with their own loss to be mourned, as fleshes nudge against one another. Therefore, transmitted from whale to human and from human to other humans, the whales’ hopeless monotone carries their grief and transforms it into a shared affective experience which acts indistinctly on humans, animals, and things—the enduring consequences become a permanent reminder of loss. While the whales’ grief is clearly transmissible, the cetaceanologists discover that it cannot be articulated in human language: “nobody would be able to imitate it accurately… for each would feel a terrible pain in the throat, like choking on a fish bone.”[[454]](#footnote-454) Instead, the affect of the whales’ grief is experienced in, through, and with flesh, lodging itself, like Otis’ grief in *Pigs*, inside the flesh of those the whales’ thing flesh nudges against.

In *Pigs*, after Otis exits the ocean, transformed through his affective interaction with thing flesh, he is thrown into a series of further transformations and interactions both *as* and *with* thing flesh, where “animal-made-objects” retain their affective power as animal matter, by asserting their recalcitrance as thing flesh. Alongside Otis’ transformation, the children’s perception of him is transformed, too; he has become indistinct from the monopoly game piece still in his hand, another piece of rubbish that the children must feed to the pigs. In his frail state, Luisa leads him towards the pigs’ pen, where,

He shut his eyes, not wanting to see what came next, but he heard the pigs squeal in competition when she flung the thimble, spinning through the air, over their heads and into the tall grass behind them. And he kept his eyes shut when she nudged him, softly at first, and then harder until eventually she was shoving him up and over the fence, and eventually he and his aching, battered body were falling down, down, down into the pen.[[455]](#footnote-455)

Otis’ experience of the island’s agentic assemblage and its thing flesh has washed away his earlier scepticism about the children feeding rubbish to the pigs; he acknowledges both this reality and his transformation into food to feed the pigs, having neither the psychological nor physical strength to resist Luisa’s guidance. The horror of what happens to the rubbish—of what will soon happen to Otis—becomes too challenging and abhorrent for him; therefore, like the world around him, Otis closes his eyes to the violent reality of the world’s detritus. However, unlike the island’s passers-by, Otis is not granted the privilege of ignorance, with the squeals of the pigs’ excitement remaining as an audible reminder of his impending consumption: a starter of thimble, a main of Otis. Luisa’s actions recall Otis’ violent interactions with the ocean’s thing flesh, where, like the fork and the barbie doll, Luisa “nudged” Otis into the pen, the same physical forces instigating yet another transformation of Otis’ flesh: food for the pigs.

Despite the apparent ease in Luisa’s actions, the children struggle with the guilt of feeding Otis to the pigs, noting “they pretended that their hands were not the hands of murderers, and that they were only doing their jobs. Feed the pigs the garbage. That was their work in life.”[[456]](#footnote-456) Like the perception of the island and Otis’ closed eyes, the children attempt to reinforce the façade that keeps the pigs fed and the thing flesh eaten: no matter the cost—from a distance, the children simply fed the pigs more thing flesh. Everyone—the children, Otis, and reader alike—expects the pigs to hastily consume Otis, like every other piece of rubbish they are fed. The pigs are seemingly obedient “animal-made-objects” who are endless voids of rubbish, both in composition and consumption. However, “the pigs ate everything,” except for Otis:

The pigs nosed him and prodded him with their hooves. Their rough tongues raked across his skin. He kept his eyes shut for a long time, waiting for pain and for the nothingness that might follow. Their snouts were surprisingly soft. The pigs snuffled and pushed him this way and that and then settled along the length of his body, heaving their enormous sides against him. They smelled like mud and sour milk and also like grass and wild onions. Their teeth stayed tucked inside their mouths. Instead, they licked his skin so hard that by the time he stood he felt like a newborn calf, wobbling on his legs, raw, clean for the first time in forever.[[457]](#footnote-457)

By refusing to consume Otis, these “animal-made-objects” retain their affective power, asserting their recalcitrance and hailing their identity as thing flesh. As the pigs envelop Otis in their flesh, firstly with their tongues, then with their bodies, Otis’ violent imaginings are transformed from those of grief and death into an experience of care and rebirth, becoming an antithesis to his interaction with the ocean’s thing flesh. His unsteady body takes on new origins, no longer formed from an “aching, battered body,” but, instead, formed from the birth of a “newborn calf, wobbling on his legs.” Even as they nose and prod him, the pigs’ actions mirror those of the thing flesh, which nudged him in the water; yet, the pigs’ affect is caring rather than malevolent, licking away the sickening affect of the thing flesh from Otis’ flesh. The pigs’ mouths are transformed, momentarily, from thing flesh consumers to sickened flesh cleansers. Therefore, as they lick him clean, Otis goes through another transformation—not the kind the children or reader expect—where he becomes an altogether reborn being, rather than food, both of which only the pigs can perform and affect. The Otis who emerges from the pen is not the same one who was nudged in.

Mimi is confused by the pigs’ recalcitrance, asking, “besides being human, what was the difference between him and any of the other discards in the mess washing up from the sea? What did the pigs know that she didn't? Sometimes even giant, magic pigs made mistakes.”[[458]](#footnote-458) Mimi places importance on Otis’ species identity as a human, projecting a supposed ontological reality that has clearly been dismantled through these pig-Otis interactions. As such, it is not Otis’ species identity as a human which differentiates him from the rest of the thing flesh food, rather it is the shared affective experience between himself and the pigs. The pigs recognise Otis as a fellow “animal-made-object,” both living animal and animal matter, able to affect and be affected by thing flesh, and in need of retaining this affective power, through asserting their recalcitrance as thing flesh. Therefore, the pigs choose not to consume Otis because these shared transformative and affective interactions with thing flesh have fostered an indistinct relationship—the distinctions between the pigs and humans, between the pigs and Otis, fall away. As Calarco notes, “if the sharp distinctions that have typically been drawn between humans and animals fall by the wayside, humans and animals fall into a shared space in which they become deeply indistinct from one another.”[[459]](#footnote-459) Both the pigs and Otis have been transformed by the thing flesh they have consumed (either orally or porously); the pigs acknowledge and understand this shared indistinct experience and welcome Otis as one of their own—a seventh pig. Otis has become, like the pigs before him, what Mimi called “transformed garbage”—an “animal-made-object” ready to assert his recalcitrance—whereby he is equally transform*ed* byand transform*ing* the thing flesh of the island, able to affect others as both a living animal and animal matter, and indistinct from the other six pigs, as they transform him in their cleaning process. Not only has Otis transformed into thing flesh, but he has also been transformed into part of the pigs’ group, too.

The pigs’ group continues to be transformed, by the island and its inhabitants, through modes of fleshy consumption: one pig is eaten and a group of grown-ups is engulfed. Through these moments of fleshy consumption, we bear witness to both the physical and psychical affective experience of the “animal-made-object,” as it becomes thing flesh. From consumed pig to consuming pig, they share a collective affective experience, expressed through physical recalcitrance and the haunting traces of their inner lives. Even as consumable flesh, we begin to see how “dismembering a living animal actually produces new agents,”[[460]](#footnote-460) which attempt to retain an active presence. Beginning this dismemberment are the grown-ups—a violent monolith set on damaging the island’s fragile speculative flesh ecology, to feed their own desires for flesh—who decide that they are hungry for pig flesh. They choose to kill, cook, and eat one of the six pigs, unfazed by the consequences of their actions:

The pig collapsed, the spear stabbed deep into her belly. She squealed. The mass of grown-ups sighed. The pig kicked her legs […] They’d stabbed the pig a few more times, and now they tied its legs around a spear, pulled it from the pen, and hoisted it onto their shoulders.[[461]](#footnote-461)

Like the stag beetle, the pig is pierced through the belly, in an attempt to render her an “animal-made-object,” ripe for human consumption. As her legs kick about, she attempts to assert some resistance, clinging to the scraps of her life, while her body writhingly succumbs to death. Alongside her quivering body, her voice, too, attempts to assert her defiance; however, her singular mortal squeals are met with the apathetic sighs of the collective grown-ups. For them, her last refusals are a mere inconvenience, rather than a sign of productive resistance, easily silenced with restraints and violence. To subdue her final pulsations and render her the “animal-made-object,” the grown-ups bind her legs. Now lifeless and inert, the pig’s transformation from living animal to animal matter is solidified through a shift in pronouns from “she/her” to “it,” explicitly marking her as the objectified animal and an object constructed from an animal: the “animal-made-object.” Her body becomes a spectacle of human control, contemptuously displayed on the grown-ups’ shoulders, before being consumed in pieces. Thus, with their violence, the grown-ups have successfully transformed the pig into the “animal-made-object” that Alice was unable to create with the stag beetle. Physically butchered instead of chemically restrained, unlike the beetle, the pig will not reanimate; instead, she will be dismembered and consumed by the flesh-hungry grown-ups, seemingly absented of all affective power.

Hauled off by the grown-ups under the cover of darkness, the pig’s murder is not immediately apparent to all of the island’s inhabitants; instead, the pigs are left to discover the loss of one of their own through traces of her flesh in their pen. Her death ripples throughout the island, generating a deep mourning which lodges itself indistinctly inside animal, human, and thing flesh:

It took the mineral smell of blood on leaves for them to realize that one of them was gone. They were new to crying. They snuffled and shuffled and grunted and moaned and let out short hiccupy sighs and paced back and forth and then breathed in sharply again. They knew nothing about expressing grief. They banged their giant bodies against the fence. They shrunk into themselves. They collapsed on top of one another and tried to turn their five enormous bodies into one. Then they each stood up and stumbled dizzily in opposite directions and cowered alone, not caring if the sun burned their skin bright red. [[462]](#footnote-462)

As the spotted pig’s blood marks leaves, the pigs engage in a violent sensory experience, detecting the death of their sister through the butchered traces of her flesh. Her fleshy fluid becomes both an indicator of loss and a violent reversal of the pigs’ role on the island: they are now the consumed, not the consumers. The spotted pig’s death, therefore, not only signals her transformation into the “animal-made-object,” but it also signals the transformation of *all* of the pigs into “animal-made-objects;” their consumption, both of and as flesh, is conditional. As iron-rich blood seeps into the olfactory sense of the pigs, they begin to express their recalcitrance as “animal-made objects,” asserting themselves as thing flesh, through their fleshy mourning. The pigs’ grief is initially dismissed as inexperience, but their fleshy manifestation of grief asserts both their recalcitrance as “animal-made-objects” and their affective power as thing flesh; as Teya Brooks Pribac notes, when humans deny animals the experience of death and grief, we fail “to appreciate the potential affective power and magnitude of the feeling of loss.”[[463]](#footnote-463) Therefore, just as the loss of the spotted pig was violently enacted on flesh, so, too, is the other pigs’ grief violently enacted on and through flesh; with each self-mutilating effort, they pierce themselves deeper in the stomach, becoming a disturbing spectacle for their human onlookers. Like the Wayo Wayoan whales, then, these pigs express their collective grief through flesh, with their disjointed and disarticulated movements capturing the inner turmoil of their mourning. As giant bodies form waves of grief against the fence, the pigs engage in the same recalcitrance as the whales, violently forcing memory from their brains, in an attempt to nullify their emotional pain through physical suffering. They reaffirm this self-mutilation through their voluntary sunburns; like the whales who beach themselves to echo the oceanic consumption of their home island, the pigs singe their own flesh to echo the consumption of their sister.

As quickly as the pigs try to fry and fragment their flesh, they also try to conjoin their flesh with one another, transforming “their five enormous bodies into one,” in an attempt to make whole what has been separated. With their fleshes merged, the pigs begin to express their collective grief audibly, through their own hopeless monotone and pain in the chest, which ripples through them indistinctly: “they cried until there was no liquid left to cry. They cried until their ribs were sore from heaving. Their hooves hurt. Their heads hurt. They cried without any hope of comfort.”[[464]](#footnote-464) Drained of physical and emotional fluid, this loss is a new experience for the pigs, who have only ever known the endless fullness of consumption. Their hopeless monotone lodges itself inside their flesh, replacing the island’s thing flesh waste with the painful debris of grief. As it moves from ribs to hooves to head, the physical pain emulates the spotted pig’s death, where she was stabbed deep in the belly, tied by her legs, and roasted over a spit; each violent transformation of the spotted pig’s flesh into the “animal-made-object” is experienced by the other five pigs as they too transform into thing flesh. After this grief-filled transformation, the pigs begin to show their recalcitrance, abstaining from consuming the world’s waste and crafting a disturbing spectacle for their human onlookers. They refuse to participate in the island’s fragile cycle of waste disposal, whereby “garbage washed ashore in a constant flood [. . .] but all the pigs would do was nose at it and pish it aside and let it pile up in smelly heaps while they lay down right in the hot sun and howled.”[[465]](#footnote-465) Full up on grief, their mournful inner life affects their physical form; the pigs have no space left for waste, every part of their stomach is bursting with the painful debris of grief. Yet, even as their fulness feasts on their grief, their rejection of refuse consumption also becomes a source of recalcitrance; they actively “let” the waste pile up, in order to disrupt the island and its inhabitants. As the rubbish bakes and decomposes in the sun, it echoes the pigs’ own self-mutilations, where they continue to fry their flesh in the sun and howl a hopeless monotone. Therefore, as waste decomposes, the children try to tempt the pigs with portions of the pile, and the pigs resist, their grief becomes a shared affective experience, which acts indistinctly through thing, human, and animal flesh.

Angered by the grown-ups’ continuously horrifying actions and troubled by the pigs’ disturbing performances, the children decide to get rid of the grown-ups and feed the pigs’ vengeful appetites; therefore, they “feed the entire passel of grown-ups to the pigs.”[[466]](#footnote-466) As they feast on flesh, a series of transformations occur, with Bennett proposing eating as “a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry: my meal both is and is not mine; you both are and are not what you eat.”[[467]](#footnote-467) Already partial to a nibble of human flesh, the pigs’ consumption of the grown-ups is to be expected; present in Stoberock’s choice of “passel,” however, is not just the grown-ups’ human flesh, but a range of fleshes readying to be consumed. A “passel” is defined as “a small party, collection, or assembly (of people, animals, or things); a detachment; a group, a lot, a set; a drove, a flock, a herd.”[[468]](#footnote-468) Passel, therefore, is both multiply fleshy, by definition, and simultaneously whole and separate, with its assembly emerging as a possible assemblage of humans, animals, *and* things, ready to consume and be consumed. These multiple fleshy interactions are reiterated, as the pigs continue to gorge on grown-ups: “women in tight dresses and men in tuxedoes vanished, screaming. It was painful being eaten. It was painful letting go of the world.”[[469]](#footnote-469) Sophisticated garments make way for coarse garbage, as the pig’s turn their consumption of the grown-ups into a disturbing performance of violence and excess. Chewed and swallowed by the pigs, the grown-ups experience a simultaneous physical and affective transformation, forever altered by the thing flesh consuming mouths of the pigs; unlike Otis, these adults will not be cleansed of sickness and reborn as one of them. The grown-ups’ consumption, instead, mirrors their consumption of the spotted pig—hoisted, squealing, pained to let go of the world. Alongside the grown-ups’ transformation into pig food, the spotted pig, who resides in the stomachs of the grown-ups, also undergoes a second transformation. As the pigs consume the screaming grown-ups, the five remaining pigs also consume fragments of the spotted pig, whose haunting trace lingers in the grown-ups’ flesh. Bound as the “animal-made-object” by the grown-ups, the spotted pig reasserts her sustained active presence in the world as thing flesh, when she encourages the other pigs to feast on flesh. They, in turn, welcome her back into the pen, turning their now six enormous bodies into one. Not only has the spotted pig—rendered the “animal-made-object” by the grown-ups—expressed her affective power as thing flesh over the grown-ups, who now become food for the pigs, but she also expresses her affective power over the other pigs, who are now satisfied with their renewed wholeness.

From the stag beetle and the whales in *TMwtCE* to the pigs in *Pigs*, the recalcitrance of the “animal-made-object” captures the agency and affective power of animals, both as the living animal and as animal matter, as they transform into thing flesh. As whales call out a hopeless monotone and pigs fry their own flesh in the sun, through grief and mutilation, these “animal-made-objects” disrupt humans’ expectations and trouble the ethical responses towards them as thing flesh. In doing so, the recalcitrance of the “animal-made-object” who asserts themselves as thing flesh “releases animals into these additional potentials, into these other possibilities.” [[470]](#footnote-470) Therefore, these bloated whales and frying pigs maintain a sustained active presence in the world, through their recalcitrance; their disturbing performances and self-mutilations continue to generate affective and ethical responses from those around them, even as their flesh begins to decompose in sand and in stomachs.

## **Five Pigs Roamed Freely**

*Pigs’* and *TMwtCE’s* speculative flesh ecologies illustrate and explore thing flesh’s affective and transformative power, where opening ourselves up to the power of thing flesh creates indistinct possibilities. As thing flesh is consumed, both orally and porously by human and animal flesh, in the novels, it speaks to the haunting and threatening presence of marine debris, while also generating indistinct ontological identities and ethical possibilities between humans, animals, things, and the environment. Caught up on or in islands littered with debris, the novels explore how humans and animals are constantly part of transformative and affective assemblages with thing flesh. As flesh is nudged, stung, and transformed, we are encouraged to rethink our affective relationships with thing flesh. Through Bennett’s development of the “call of things,” these novels suggest that some humans and animals are more open to the affective power of thing flesh and more perceptive to the ethical positions that taking thing flesh’s affective power seriously can generate. When thing flesh is conjoined with, played with, and responded to, it complicates the distinct ontological boundaries between thing flesh and other forms of flesh. Evoking Fudge’s concept of the “animal-made-object,” the novels explore how, in becoming thing flesh, animals can retain their affective and transformative power. Their recalcitrant behaviours as thing flesh encourage us to rethink our ethical positionality towards the animals who become thing flesh and the humans and animals who are affected and transformed by it.

Bennett outlines her understanding of nonhuman participation in the political ecology as an expansive endeavour, suggesting that

to acknowledge nonhuman materialities as participants in a political ecology is not to claim that everything is always a participant, or that all participants are alike. [. . .] But surely the scope of democratization can be broadened to acknowledge more nonhumans in more ways, in something like the ways in which we have come to hear the political voices of other humans formerly on the outs.[[471]](#footnote-471)

If we reorient Bennett’s explanation of the political ecology to centre speculative flesh ecologies, we are, once again, reminded of Calarco’s assertion that leaving the boundaries of ethical consideration open is the best way to practice indistinction:

to acknowledge nonhuman materialities as participants in [speculative flesh ecologies] is not to claim that everything is always a participant, or that all participants are alike. But surely the scope of [ontological and ethical thinking] can be broadened to acknowledge more nonhumans in more ways, in something like the ways in which we have come to hear the [ethical voices] of other humans formerly on the outs.[[472]](#footnote-472)

Drawing attention to their thing flesh littered speculative flesh ecologies, then, the analyses I offer of *Pigs* and *TMwtCE* suggest that we should proceed with Bennett and Calarco’s indistinct approaches. As microplastics dwell within our flesh and giant piles of rubbish smother our earth, *Pigs* and *TMwtCE* encourage us to see the debris ridden island of Midway Atoll anew. If we acknowledge our place in these thing flesh assemblages—with coffee cups, toothbrushes, garbage-eating pigs, and recalcitrant whales—we can begin to respond differently, be open to their affective power, and understand that thing flesh operates indistinctly with(in) flesh; as Stoberock notes, “maybe there was really no distinction to be made.”[[473]](#footnote-473) In dismantling these ontological distinctions, we open up the scope of ethical possibility.

With “animal-made-objects” insistently asserting their affective power as thing flesh, they gesture towards alternative routes to indistinction that do not draw boundaries between animate and seemingly inanimate beings. My next chapter develops the exploration of these alternative routes to indistinction, by exploring cultured flesh’s indistinction from actual animal flesh. As I analyse ‘A Series of Steaks’ and *Beef*’s cultured flesh creations—Fake Beef and Proper Meat—I explore how their speculative flesh ecologies complicate the dual estrangement and indistinction between cultured flesh and actual animals that is utilised by contemporary cultured flesh companies. Walking into the printing rooms and lab-facs of ‘A Series of Steaks’ and *Beef*’s speculative flesh ecologies, we begin to understand the productive ethical possibilities that arise from exploring the ontological distinction between lively animal flesh and supposedly inanimate cultured flesh, between the original and the simulacrum, between the real and the *real*.

# “Actual Real Proper Meat”: Cultured Flesh and Simulacra in Mat Blackwell’s *Beef* (2016) and Vina Jie-Min Prasad’s ‘A Series of Steaks’ (2017)

## **The Future of Meat is Here[[474]](#footnote-474)**

Cultured flesh (known also as in vitro meat, vat-meat, clean meat, lab grown meat) is purported to br being “the inescapable future of humanity”[[475]](#footnote-475) and “a simple solution to complex problems.”[[476]](#footnote-476) On the surface, cultured flesh appears to promise to solve many of humanity’s ills—the environmental crisis, human health, animal welfare, and food shortages—in one succinct technology. However, the reality of these claims is yet to be evidenced, since cultured flesh technology remains in its infancy. Progressing throughout the twenty-first century, small steps have been made towards viable cultured flesh for consumption: Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr successfully cultured and consumed frog flesh for their bioart project, “Disembodied Cuisine,” in 2003; Mark Post debuted his cultured flesh burger in London in 2013; and Eat Just served their cultured chicken flesh to a group of paying guests in Singapore in 2020. Each of these public displays of cultured flesh’s creation and consumption suggests that a cultured flesh future could soon arrive; Eat Just would even say that “the future of meat is here.” [[477]](#footnote-477)

Open Eat Just’s “GOOD Meat” website—outlining their cultured flesh product, GOOD Meat—and you’ll be greeted by a video of consumers happily tucking into cultured chicken curry. As we watch them snapping photographs for Instagram and discussing cultured chicken, they hit every cultivated marketing point (including outlining the production process), while making us feel like we are witnessing the realexperience—we are allowed to partake in this cultured chicken curry, too. They praise the improvement of welfare, environment, and food security, that growing cultured flesh on a global scale could bring, while remarking on how indistinguishable cultured chicken is from the “real thing”: “it tastes exactly *like* chicken [my emphasis].”[[478]](#footnote-478) But for Eat Just, GOOD Meat is not *like* real meat, it *is* real meat. This insistence of cultured flesh as *real* meat is indicative of companies like Eat Just, since, as John Miller notes,

meat’s enduring cultural status as the centre of gastronomy runs deep; because of this, those involved in the development of the post-animal bioeconomy are determined that their product should be thought of as *real* meat, rather than as a second-order simulation.[[479]](#footnote-479)

Eat Just’s website goes on to state that their “GOOD Meat” is “real meat, made without tearing down a forest or taking a life.”[[480]](#footnote-480) Their emphasis on authenticity further attempts to distinguish GOOD Meat from both plant-based meat and genetically modified food, since cultured flesh has long been negatively associated with imaginings of both “fake meat” and “franken-meat.”[[481]](#footnote-481) For cultured flesh to be considered authentic *real* meat, then, there is an assumption that animals are present—whether materially or disembodied—and Eat Just certainly use these assumptions for their benefit, carefully curating animal associations that allow them to control animals—both physically and as a marketing tool—in their cultured flesh. Therefore, we must ask, where are the actual animals in Eat Just’s *real* meat?

As well as animal cells being materially intrinsic in cultured flesh, animals are also fundamental to both the eating experience of cultured flesh and its positive messaging. As images of both chickens and cultured chicken flesh adorn their website, there is an interesting slippage at work in Eat Just’s marketing around animals because they attempt to separate their cultured flesh from animals—in slaughter, disease, genetic modification, and environmental degradation—while also attempting to make it indistinct from animals—in cell lines, taste, and cultural signification; as one consumer remarks, “that is chicken, but it isn’t an animal.”[[482]](#footnote-482) The irony of the chicken as animal and as meat operates to highlight the complexity of the concurrent distinction and indistinction between cultured flesh and the animals that exist with(in) it. Therefore, as consumers grapple with cultured flesh’s ontological identity, among Eat Just’s multi-layered messaging, it becomes clear that 1) cultured flesh is chicken, but it is not *a* chicken, and 2) cultured flesh is *real* meat without the messy complexities of animal life. Eat Just’s marketing of the “real” and their slippage between animals and their cultured flesh, then, draws upon the logic of carniveracity, a neologism created by Robert McKay which he defines as “the facticious and inherently paradoxical assertion that meat-eating goes without saying; it is natural, normal, fundamental, necessary, real, truthful, authentic.”[[483]](#footnote-483) Meat as a natural, normal, and aspirational food, therefore, can be maintained by Eat Just’s GOOD Meat because of both its origination from actual animals and its separation from them. Through Eat Just, consumers can feast on *real* chicken flesh, while actual animals are kept separate. This separation becomes an ethical marketing point, which is captured by an endless image of caged chickens which tops the “Animal” section of GOOD Meat’s “Purpose” page, accompanied by a claim: “GOOD Meat allows us to respect animals.”[[484]](#footnote-484) Despite and in contradistinction to alternative options, like veganism, Eat Just claim that their cultured flesh is the best way to “respect animals.” There is a similar dichotomous logic at work, here, regarding “respect”: we respect animals by eating without killing, but we must eat them to respect them; cultured flesh allows us to do both. However, this respect is managed: Eat Just’s cultured flesh suggests that *a* chicken—the actual animals—is respectable, whereas chicken flesh and cell lines—the biological traces of chickens—are not. Once again, Eat Just uphold the carniveracity of cultured flesh, maintaining a simultaneously semantic and ethical distinction between *a* chicken and the biological traces of a chicken in their cultured flesh. Eat Just’s cultured flesh future, then, is one where traces of a chicken in their cultured flesh are, all at once, present and hidden, celebrated and obfuscated, actual and *real*.

Eat Just further stress the cultural signification of meat and suggest that flesh’s consumption is intrinsically tied to human culture and identity: “we will always eat meat. To share the planet together, we have to do it differently.”[[485]](#footnote-485) Eat Just are attempting to co-opt their consumers into what McKay calls “compulsory humanity,” where “the first and foundational expression of compulsory humanity is to hoodwink us into believing that we must be human instead of vegan.”[[486]](#footnote-486)Eat Just promote flesh consumption as an essential part of being human and offer the *real* meat of their cultured flesh as a planet and animal friendly alternative. GOOD Meat, Eat Just tell us, is the only way to inhabit humanity in the “future of meat.” Again, they are careful to accompany their centring of meat in human society with an awareness of animals’ welfare and environmental issues central to the farming of animals; yet, for Eat Just, their solution and speculative future is clear: humans will continue to eat meat—cementing meat’s role in human culture and identity—but this meat will come from cultured flesh, from GOOD Meat. As we near the end of Eat Just’s video, then, we see a glimpse of a cultured flesh future, one very carefully constructed to promote the benefits of their product. We ask, could we one day soon be sitting down with our friends to consume cultured flesh, extolling this technological solution that has created *real* meat, “meat without slaughter, meat without harm, meat without limits?”[[487]](#footnote-487)

Cultured flesh’s promised solutions, ontological ambiguities, performative interactions, and *real* presentations are extrapolated in Mat Blackwell’s novel, *Beef* (2016), and Vina Jie-Min Prasad’s novelette, ‘A Series of Steaks’ (2017). Both of these speculative fictions complicate the polished messaging of cultured flesh companies, like Eat Just, encouraging us to ask what a speculative cultured flesh future might look like and what the consequences could be. While *Beef* satirises large, cultured flesh companies, like Eat Just, through the deceptive marketing techniques of the fictional company, The Beef Corporation, ‘A Series of Steaks’ critiques cultured flesh’s promotion as a “techno-fix,” revealing that cultured flesh still perpetuates the exploitation of animals. Both texts trouble Eat Just’s dual estrangement and indistinction of animals and highlight the indistinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh. As cultured flesh slips between parted lips, its creation, consumption, and presentation are constantly questioned, recalling animals in every bite, butchering, and beating chunk of flesh.

*Beef* imagines a speculative future Australia, where cultured flesh means meat is no longer murder, freed farmed animals have gone wild, and psychics can experience the haunting traces of cultured flesh beings. *Beef* follows the life of Royston Beowulf Rene Beef, grandson of the famous “vat-meat” creator and animal liberator, Rene Beowulf Rudy Beef, who was a charismatic speaker and talented scientist. After exposing the horrors of animal agriculture and creating an inanimate facsimile of animal flesh, Rene Beef is able to convert Australia’s populace into solely consuming his cultured flesh—animal flesh eating becomes a black-market activity for “corpse eaters” and newly freed “night cows” wreak havoc on Australia’s flora and fauna. With his grandfather’s revolutionary success, Royston carries the burden of the Beef legacy, never feeling like he can live up to Rene’s charisma or scientific knowledge. He leads an average life—he has a wife and daughter and works at the family’s Beef Corporation—until he meets Gene, a psychic, who prompts him to question everything he has ever known. Royston employs Gene to create a musical advertisement for the Beef Corporation’s cultured flesh, and they begin travelling and working together. As their relationship progresses, Royston begins to learn troubling things about himself and his family; for example, his father consumed animal flesh for three years. We begin to surmise that all is not as it appears with the Beefs, the ubiquitous Beef Corporation, or in this speculative cultured flesh future. In their plethora of labfac’s, The Beef Corporation grow and harvest cultured flesh—a seemingly inanimate mass of flesh grown and exercised on bone-like structures—to feed the ethically motivated Australian populace. However, after years of misinformation, Gene and Royston’s trip to one of the lab-factories reveals a terrifying truth, when Gene’s psychic abilities hear the traces of cultured flesh: in creating this cultured flesh—which, like GOOD Meat, claimed to be *real* meat—“Rene Beowulf Rudy Beef had created real organisms.”[[488]](#footnote-488) As news circulates about the ontological reality of the Beef’s cultured flesh, there is soon a unanimous decision to euthanise the cultured flesh creatures and cease the consumption of flesh altogether. This cultured flesh future, then, is one where reality is obfuscated and meat is still murder.

The obfuscation of the real takes on a renewed form in ‘A Series of Steaks,’ whichfollows protagonist, Helena Li Yuanhui, as she is forced to create the largest-scale beef forgery that her business, Splendid Beef Enterprises, has ever seen. Extorted by “Mr. Anonymous,” who threatens to reveal her identity and whereabouts to a grudging family, Helena embarks on creating two hundred Hereford cow T-bone steaks. Up until the extorsion, Helena has been successfully supplying a small number of customers with cultured flesh—a “grey area” within Chinese law—in order to afford a new identity for herself. She utilises her skills from her university organ-printing days and artistry to create successful forgeries, complete with indistinct taste and unique marbling. The large-scale workload of the T-bone steaks forces Helena to employ an assistant, Lily (who, it later transpires, also worked in organ-printing). Together they set to work on the intricate designs of the two hundred individual steaks. Receiving daily threats and demands from Mr. Anonymous, Helena and Lily are determined to find out who the order is for; they discover it is for Dominic Cai, a vertical livestock farmer of Hereford cows, who plans to serve the steaks at his daughter’s wedding. Cai boasts about the innovation and cleanliness of his vertical farm, despite the cramped conditions of the cows, but the T-bone order makes clear that Helena’s cultured flesh is being used as a cover for an outbreak of bovine parasitic cancer in Cai’s farm. He wishes to present Helena’s cultured flesh as the “real thing,” but Helena and Lily devise a plan to reveal the cultured nature of their flesh: “a picture of a happy cow, surrounded by little hearts, etched into the T-bone of two hundred perfectly-printed steaks.”[[489]](#footnote-489) After executing their plan, Helena and Lily run away together, leaving a legacy of forged flesh behind them; their cultured flesh future is one where forgery means exposure and freedom.

Like Eat Just’s *real* meat, the texts engage with cultured flesh through negotiations of the *real*, whether this is as *real* solution, experience, animal, meat, or culture. In their speculative flesh ecologies, we are encouraged to take up a critical view towards the dual estrangement and indistinction of actual animals in cultured flesh’s *real* meat and craft new routes to indistinction, through performances of *realness* and the traumatic legacy of flesh. Faced with the horror, violence, and suffering that accompanies this indistinction, the texts provide self-referential satire and camp performances that allow us to take up alternate modes of witnessing and find pleasure in trauma. As flesh squirms and shrieks on techno-skeletons and bioreactors house traumatised cows’ flesh, the cultured flesh creations of *Beef* and ‘A Series of Steaks’ complicate cultured flesh’s association to the term in vitro, whereby, cells are grown “under artificial conditions rather than in a living organism;”[[490]](#footnote-490) the actual animals of *real* meat do not stay obfuscated forever. Therefore, the cultured flesh that grows within the novels defies the cleanly cultivated image of Eat Just’s chicken, with the haunting traces of actual animals bleeding through into the excessive performances of *real* meat. In this chapter, I will argue that *Beef* and ‘A Series of Steaks’ develop the indistinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh, whereby they locate the actual animals in *real* meat. The texts make fictionally clear the discursive manipulation of *realness* that is needed to substantiate the value of cultured flesh as *real* meat and demonstrate that it is not possible to separate actual animals from cultured flesh—they will leak, seep, and bleed through in haunting impressions, traumatic utterances, and performative screams. As I analyse the texts, their speculative flesh ecologies posit the performative and material indistinctions between actual animals and *real* meat as strategies that undermine the carniveracity perpetuated by cultured flesh, encouraging us to continuously risk seeing fleshy beings as “simultaneously both meat and more than meat.”[[491]](#footnote-491)

## **Simulacra, Simulation, and Hyperreality**

How can we—or should we—perceive the *real* in relation to cultured flesh? How do we discern the promises of cultured flesh’s *real* solution as a techno-fix, as it pertains to the environment, animal welfare, human health, and food stability? What are the implications of legitimating the consumption of *real* animal flesh, in cultured flesh form, as an intrinsic part of human identity? How can we locate actual animals in cultured flesh, and how might they become—both promisingly and troublingly—indistinct from one another? Baudrillard’s work on simulacra, simulation, and hyperreality offers a way of responding to these speculative realities of cultured flesh. Baudrillard suggests that there are three stages of simulation; in the postmodern age, we are currently experiencing the third stage, where “simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”[[492]](#footnote-492) To exist within this hyperreality populated by simulacra and simulation is to become “sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences.”[[493]](#footnote-493) As such, we have become so far removed from the real that we can no longer discern the real from the *real*, forever caught up in a cyclical generation of simulacra. In these hyperreal worlds of obfuscated reality and distinction, then, what might flesh become?

Baudrillard does not discuss the hyperreal conditions of flesh specifically, in his work; however, he does discuss the indistinct experiences of humans and animals, the fleshy fragility of a hyperreal war, the cloning of human flesh, the hyperreality of “imaginary” spaces, and science fiction, which I have collated and analysed to create a framework for thinking through the *realness* of cultured flesh and the indistinction and estrangement of actual animals within cultured flesh. Present in each of these discussions are animals, flesh, affect, and speculative representation, which are read with Baudrillard’s ideas of the *real*. Applied to cultured flesh, each of these areas brings new insight to how cultured flesh operates in these hyperreal worlds and how it functions as a site of simulacra as the *real*; as Miller notes, “in vitro meat seems to some to belong in a terrifyingly postmodern future in which the natural has disappeared under layers of simulation.”[[494]](#footnote-494) Therefore, by applying Baudrillard’s discussions, I begin to make sense of a speculative flesh ecology, where cultured flesh is the *real* “future of meat,” navigating the consequences of these conditions on animals, flesh, affect, and speculative representation. This approach builds on the already critically lively nature of reading the *real* with animals. Steve Baker comments that “postmodern scepticism about the operation of truth and knowledge has undoubtedly complicated any thinking about animals: about what counts as ‘authentic’ experience.”[[495]](#footnote-495) In this postmodern scepticism, Baker captures the uncertainty of deciphering the real, in relation to experiences of and with animals, suggesting that we have become unable to discern the real from the *real*. Building on humans’ relationship with animals in the postmodern, Baker also suggests that animals’ “disarticulated” bodies (an example of this body would be animals' existence as cultured flesh) have become more interesting to us. Baker states that Cary Wolfe’s interpretation of the distinction between Sue Coe and Eduardo Kac’s art

reflects a more widespread academic and aesthetic rhetoric: a taste—often for good reasons—for the decentered, deconstructed, distributed, and displaced [. . .] Extended to the animal-object-in-art, it amounts more troublingly to the view that the “disarticulated” body is more sophisticated, edgy, *contemporary* than the articulated (even if differently articulated) body.[[496]](#footnote-496)

Cultured flesh can be viewed as such a “disarticulated” animal body, this displaced animal-object-in-art, which has been crafted from the flesh of animals to be displayed, consumed, and celebrated as a great innovation in art, culture, and technology. Catts and Zurr capture the fascination with cultured flesh as this disarticulated animal body in their art project, “Disembodied Cuisine,” where “frog skeletal muscle was grown over biopolymer for potential food consumption, while the healthy frogs lived alongside as part of the installation.”[[497]](#footnote-497) Side by side, disarticulated and articulated, Catts and Zurr’s disembodied cuisine and whole frogs illustrates the complex presentation of the disarticulated animal body as cultured flesh alongside the articulated animal body used in its promotion. There is a preoccupation with the disarticulated animal body, then, which reveals the troubling nature of a cultured flesh future, where animals become fragments of cultured flesh and cultured flesh becomes *real* meat. With the disarticulated body in mind, we can turn to Baudrillard’s work and focus on his discussion of the *real*, alongside animals, flesh, affect, and speculative representation.

Baudrillard’s exploration of animals’ access and relationship to the real in “The Animals: Territory and Metamorphoses” provides insight into locating the actual animals in cultured flesh. Despite his radical approach to modes of being in and relating to the world, Baudrillard maintains one distinction between humans and animals: humans have an unconscious because they have lost territory, whereas animals do not have an unconscious because they have territory. He notes that “at once territories and metamorphoses have been taken from [humans]—the unconscious is the individual structure of mourning in which this loss is incessantly, hopelessly replayed—animals are the nostalgia for it.”[[498]](#footnote-498) With this distinction, then, Baudrillard argues that animals have access to the real and their existence recalls a search for the real that humans are denied access to. Animals are connected to a point in time, before hyperreality took full effect; in yearning for territory, then, humans are yearning for a pre-hyperreality era, an era of the real, even if they are not fully aware. However, this human yearning can be complicated by the figuring of the “postmodern animal,” which Steve Baker states,

is just this ‘face of the real’. It does not so much set itself against meaning as operate independently of it. Humans have typically wanted things of animals, wanting them to be meaningful, and wanting to control and to be consoled by those meanings. Postmodernism mistrusts this comfortably centered self’s desire.[[499]](#footnote-499)

For Baker, then, animals’ access to the real is itself a simulacrum; they are simply a ‘face of the real’ and these distinctions between humans and animals are, as Baudrillard comments elsewhere, “the simulated generation of differences”[[500]](#footnote-500) that sustain hyperreality. Humans’ imbuing of animals with access to the real, therefore, only serves to perpetuate systems of exploitation, forcing animals to exist in constant states of submission, where humans attempt to bleed meaning from their already weeping flesh. Baudrillard’s human yearning, then, captures the approach of cultured flesh companies like Eat Just, for whom animals exist only as an access point to the real that can be manipulated to promote the *realness* of their cultured flesh. Animals are a way of imbuing their cultured flesh with the normative—and always exploitable—*realness* of actual animals in animal flesh that is both intrinsic to and obfuscated from cultured flesh’s marketing, ontological identity, and consumption.

Alongside this human and animal distinction, Baudrillard’s discussion of animals also explores the oftentimes violent spaces of indistinction, where human and animal flesh undergo indistinct experiences, resulting in a shared traumatic legacy of flesh. As confessions—both verbal and bodily—are pulled from flesh with violence, Baudrillard introduces tortured confessions as a site of indistinction: “in this sense we are all animals, and laboratory animals, whom one continually tests in order to extort their reflex behaviors [sic].”[[501]](#footnote-501) Held captive, undergoing multiple experiments, both humans and animals experience the violent processes of tortured confession, as their captors hope to learn compromising information about their victims. By making these connections between human and animal experience, Baudrillard asks us to think about the consequences of scientific innovation and experimentation for humans, animals, and—extending the parameters—“a new class for exploitation” (cultured flesh beings).[[502]](#footnote-502) Building on his explorations of the laboratory, Baudrillard considers another contemporary site of animal exploitation and indistinct potential: the farm and slaughterhouse. Recalling a myriad of human-created animal afflictions, from anxiety ridden rabbits and the psychic collective hysteria of chickens to the obsessive licking of mourning calves and cannibalised pigs, Baudrillard explains how animals in contemporary farming environments suffer both physically *and* psychically, even if the latter is often denied to them. Each affliction is a symptom of the contemporary animal agricultural system, which seeks to make profit from the flesh of captive, exploited, and afflicted animals. Baudrillard suggests that changes to the living conditions of these animals are only considered, when their afflictions begin to harm profits: “this drop in profitability may lead the breeders to return the animals to more normal living conditions.”[[503]](#footnote-503) Since every decision about farmed animals’ lives is considered through the lens of profit over welfare, the motivations of cultured flesh companies, like Eat Just are, once again, called into question: is cultured flesh created to improve the welfare of farmed animals, or is it just another way to turn animal flesh into profit? Furthermore, Baudrillard notes that it is not just animals whose sick and profitable flesh is put before their welfare; instead, “the parallel between these animals sick from surplus value and humans sick from industrial concentration, from the scientific organization of work and assembly-line factories is illuminating.”[[504]](#footnote-504) Once again, Baudrillard highlights the indistinction of humans and animals under contemporary capitalist farming systems; each being on the assembly line carries the haunting impressions of the traumatic legacy of flesh, flowing feebly from one to the other. The only thing that distinguishes their experiences is the “inevitability of death [that] renders the example of animals more shocking still than that of men on the assembly line.”[[505]](#footnote-505) Even during these moments of apparent indistinction, the current systems of exploitation render animal flesh more consumable and profitable. Therefore, whether assembly-line or petri-dish, animal flesh bears the imprints of the traumatic legacy of flesh, as it makes its way towards a certain death.

In “The Orbital and the Nuclear,” Baudrillard suggests that due to the deterrent authorities of nuclear power and satellites, “only simulacra of conflicts and carefully circumscribed stakes remain.”[[506]](#footnote-506) He cites the Vietnam War as one such “simulacra of conflicts”—a hyperreal war—where, even though the events continue, “they no longer have any meaning, they are no longer anything but the duplex effect of simulation at the summit.”[[507]](#footnote-507) While these claims appear troubling, since they appear to deny the violence of these hyperreal wars, Baudrillard is, in fact, suggesting that, when we refer to the Vietnam War, we are always doing so through a historical compendium of events and political rhetoric; the Vietnam War itself becomes a trope. Therefore, the hyperreality of the Vietnam War becomes separate from the geopolitical reality of the events taking place in Vietnam, whereby, the real—the geopolitical reality—is still present, but access to the *real* is granted only via the “simulacra of conflicts”—the trope of the war. Despite this estrangement, Baudrillard acknowledges that “the war is no less atrocious for being only a simulacrum—the flesh suffers just the same, and the dead and former combatants are worth the same as in other wars.”[[508]](#footnote-508) Even when violence is experienced as part of a simulation, then, the reality of fleshy suffering is maintained. Flesh continues to retain the traces of this suffering, passing it down as a traumatic legacy of flesh, which bears the real imprints of a simulated conflict. The flesh of hyperreality, then, suffers just the same as the flesh of pre-hyperreality; therefore, when this logic of suffering is applied to cultured flesh and its animal flesh originators, the violence and suffering they experience is not negated by their existence in hyperreality or their identity as simulacra. Therefore, Baudrillard’s hyperreal fleshy suffering raises ethical questions for both cultured flesh beings and the actual animals with(in) them.

Baudrillard’s “Clone Story” focuses on the relationship between cloned flesh and original flesh, capturing the collapse of alterity and the imaginary due to technology. Baudrillard suggests that the clone acts as a double, whereby

it is an imaginary figure, which [. . .] haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always averted death.[[509]](#footnote-509)

The clone, then, is, all at once, real flesh and *real* flesh, caught in a strange exchange with the original flesh, both perpetually seeking to assert their own ontological identity, while being obfuscated by the other. Cultured flesh, too, functions in this same way, caught up in the same exchange with actual animals. Like the clone, cultured flesh leaves infinite haunting impressions on the flesh that it permeates and originates from, creating an inner estrangement of the original flesh—even when the original flesh dies and decomposes, the cloned flesh will live on, ad infinitum. Baudrillard’s assessment of cloned flesh allows it to affect its originator, transforming the original flesh into a simulacrum of itself, where no definitive real remains; the distinctions between the cloned flesh and the original flesh begin to fall away, leaving behind only hyperreality’s indistinct flesh, where only the “simulated generation of differences”[[510]](#footnote-510) remain between cloned and original flesh. These simultaneous estrangements and indistinctions are reified, once again, by Baudrillard, through the clone as technology: “Neither child, nor twin, nor narcissistic reflection, the clone is the materialization of the double by genetic means, that is to say the abolition of all alterity and of any imaginary.”[[511]](#footnote-511) Made not born, not only does the clone dismantle the alterity between itself and its individual originator, but it simultaneously dismantles alterity between cloned flesh and original flesh, as a whole; they become troublingly indistinct from one another, neither of them able to be ontologically categorised. These troubling indistinctions are also at work between cultured flesh and actual animals, whereby both become indistinctly fleshy, *real*, and consumable. Their connection and artificial separation leaves “room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences.”[[512]](#footnote-512) Such simulations are orchestrated by and result in, Baudrillard suggests, a “delirious apotheosis of a productive technology,”[[513]](#footnote-513) whereby cloning technology has been elevated to an illusory divinity, able to generate new simulacra and maintain hyperreality. Both fictional cultured flesh companies like *Beef*’s Beef Corporation and nonfictional companies like Eat Just proselytise about culture flesh technology as endlessly beneficial, too; Eat Just even quote an article about their cultured flesh technology on their website: “it’s a big step forward for a technology that stands to bring a desperately needed change to how the world eats.”[[514]](#footnote-514) Cultured flesh technology, then, is purposefully elevated to such illusory divinity by the companies who use it, in order to reap the financial rewards and maintain a hyperreality where cultured flesh is *real* meat. Finally, Baudrillard suggests that the segments of the clone bring an end to the body as a whole, leaving behind only fragments of flesh, like Baker’s disarticulated body:

if all information can be found in each of its parts, the whole loses its meaning. It is also the end of the body, of this singularity called body, whose secret is precisely that it cannot be segmented into additional cells, that it is an indivisible configuration.[[515]](#footnote-515)

Cloned fragments, then, much like those of animal flesh, expose the body to new forms of violence as simulation, while also liberating it from the constraints of the real—it is no longer possible to discern the fragmented cloned flesh from the totalising body of original flesh. Cloning is both a violent regeneration of simulacra and a liberating innovation of simulation.

Baudrillard attempts to solidify his claims about cloning through his engagement with David Rorvik’s pseudo-nonfiction book, *In His Image: The Cloning of Man* (1978), where Rorvik claimed to have “been involved in the 1973 creation of a clone of a specific human being described as a wealthy businessman called Max.”[[516]](#footnote-516) Rorvik’s book, although presented as a science memoir, is actually more akin to a speculative fiction novel, yet Baudrillard references it as the first human cloning: “in the United States, a child was born a few months ago like a geranium: from cuttings. The first clone child (the lineage of an individual via vegetal multiplication).”[[517]](#footnote-517) While Rorvik’s clone story raises some interesting ethical and ontological questions, Baudrillard’s reliance on Rorvik’s speculation as a scientific reference is troubling. However, taking speculative fiction seriously in these discussions of cultured flesh and the *real*—albeit, not as scientific fact, in the case of Baudrillard and Rorvik—is beneficial and reveals how speculative fiction functions in a world of hyperreality. Using speculative fiction as a medium to negotiate simulacra, simulation, and hyperreality is an idea that Baudrillard explores separately from his discussion of Rorvik. He proposes the idea of third order science fiction: the “simulacra of simulation.” Baudrillard suggests that

perhaps science fiction from the cybernetic and hyperreal era can only exhaust itself, in its artificial resurrection of “historical” worlds, can only try to reconstruct in vitro, down to the smallest details, the perimeters of a prior world, the events, the people, the ideologies, of the past, emptied of meaning, of their original process, but hallucinatory with retrospective truth.[[518]](#footnote-518)

For Baudrillard, then, science fiction risks operating to further elevate the simulation, by emptying the real of its meaning, through a further generation of simulacra. Like the real that it now writes over, science fiction becomes a tool of the simulation, attempting to imbue the speculative future with a simulated past, a *real*, unaware that it is simply a regeneration of simulacra. Science fiction, therefore, would, according to Baudrillard, find itself caught up—like humans towards animals—yearning for access to a real that is no longer accessible, that no longer exists.

Although Baudrillard suggests that science fiction appears to elevate the simulation, I suggest that rather than simply yearning for access to the real, speculative fiction grants us a critical view of the *real*, of the “fragments of this universal simulation that have become for us the so-called real world.”[[519]](#footnote-519) Speculative fiction has the potential to reveal the indistinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh—the simulation of *real* meat—through literary strategies that complicate *real* meat’s dual estrangement and indistinction of the original by cultured flesh companies. In both *Beef* and ‘A Series of Steaks,’ actual animals’ presence within cultured flesh is revealed and highlighted—restoring Carol J. Adams’ “absent referent”[[520]](#footnote-520)—alongside the indistinction between animal flesh and cultured flesh. Eat Just market their cultured flesh as *real* meat, The Beef Corporation expose the obfuscation of the aliveness of their cultured flesh, and Splendid Beef Enterprises expose the obfuscation of actual animal suffering. Using Baudrillard’s approach to the *real*, then, I will look at how Blackwell’s novel, *Beef*, and Prasad’s novelette, ‘A Series of Steaks,’ explore cultured flesh as *real* meat and complicate the dual estrangements and indistinctions present in cultured flesh companies’ marketing of *real* meat. Exploring cultured flesh and its representation in these speculative fictions expands our understanding of the speculative flesh ecology in four ways: 1) cultured flesh complicates the indistinction of flesh in the speculative flesh ecology, encouraging us to constantly rethink and reimagine our ethical response to fleshy beings; 2) cultured flesh highlights the ever-exploitable nature of flesh; 3) cultured flesh’s performativity and extrapolated suffering opens up new routes of indistinction and alternative modes of ethical witnessing; and 4) cultured flesh highlights the presence of the traumatic legacy of flesh. By satirising the carniveracity of Eat Just and forging new routes to indistinction, the texts’ explorations of cultured flesh demonstrate that cultured flesh’s ontological identity as *real* meat effects the animals whose flesh creates it, the humans who consume it, and the cultured flesh beings who become it.

## **Proper Meat**

Inhabiting the hyperreal worlds of third order simulation, both Blackwell and Prasad’s fictions grapple with the *realness* of cultured flesh as a product of hyperreality, utilising and—both explicitly and implicitly—subverting many of the same strategies as Eat Just. Their portrayals of cultivated marketing techniques and the “delirious apotheosis” of the techno-fix capture the messy processes and motivations required to sell the *realness* of their cultured flesh. Whether grown on machines or rendered by printers, the cultured flesh of both The Beef Corporation and Splendid Beef Enterprises troubles the ontological identity of cultured flesh as *real* meat; it is simultaneously a simulacrum of animal flesh, where the original flesh has been obfuscated, and a simulacrum of current iterations of cultured flesh, forever generating simulacra of *real* animal flesh, whereby the real and the *real* are no longer discernible from one another. Furthermore, the fictions manage the simultaneous estrangement and indistinction of animals’ presence in cultured flesh to locate the actual animals in *real* meat.

Enter the world of *Beef* and you’ll be surrounded by “the most recognised symbol on the planet”—more well-known than both McDonalds and the Crucifix, we are told: The Beef Corporation logo.[[521]](#footnote-521) A paradoxically intensified and maximalised version of Eat Just, The Beef Corporation grows and sells their cultured flesh to the world’s populace, marketing it as “Proper Meat”[[522]](#footnote-522)—*real* meat—that offers consumers a stark choice: “to side with captivity and murder and exploitation, or to side with situational cellular growth technologies that could replicate the texture, feel, flavour and consistency of the muscle-fibres of any animal at all, with zero cruelty.”[[523]](#footnote-523) As if culled from the Eat Just website, The Beef Corporation accompany the indistinguishable taste and texture of animal flesh with the assurance of an ethically impermeable production process, creating a “meat without slaughter, meat without harm, meat without limits”[[524]](#footnote-524) from “any animal at all.” The ambiguity of The Beef Corporation’s animal source operates in the same way as Eat Just’s suggestion of a limitless flesh, stressing the potential and inevitability of a cultured flesh future hailed by the “delirious apotheosis of a productive technology.”[[525]](#footnote-525) Their culturing technologies ensure that their cultured flesh *is* the *real* meat of any animal—cow, chicken, human? Therefore, as for Eat Just, The Beef Corporation’s vat-meat is not *like* real meat, it *is real* meat, which “hadn’t been mockmeat, or notmeat, or semimeat, or nu-meat—it had been meat meat, plain and simple.”[[526]](#footnote-526) The narrator renounces these plant-based meat synonyms to describe The Beef Corporation’s cultured flesh, which risk sanitising the *realness* of the meat, opting, instead, for the more absolute “Proper Meat,” “vatmeat,” or “meat meat,” which stress both the cultured nature of the flesh and its *realness*. The monikers of *realness* are underwritten with Blackwell’s satirization of The Beef Corporation’s carniveracity, where “meat meat” and “Proper Meat” become terms of ridicule towards the carnophallogocentric subject: we don’t eat “mockmeat,” we eat, “Proper Meat,” “meat meat, plain and simple.” Animal flesh, therefore, is featured, once again, by a cultured flesh company, to assert the *realness* of their cultured flesh, while ensuring that the actual animal is simultaneously obfuscated to assert the ethical identity of their cultured flesh, too. These marketing strategies are proven to be extremely effective, with Royston growing up “so surrounded by ubiquitous vat-meat normalcy that there was simply no way he could’ve comprehended the world of slaughter.”[[527]](#footnote-527) Not only has cultured flesh become the *real* meat of choice, but its consumption—alongside its cruelty-free marketing—has radically altered the view towards the farming of animals; like Eat Just’s GOOD Meat, The Beef Corporation’s Proper Meat “allows us to respect animals.” [[528]](#footnote-528) Blackwell’s satirical exploration of these marketing strategies encourages us to be wary of cultured flesh companies’ claims—meat without limits, respect animals, and zero cruelty—with his presentation of the “ubiquitous vat-meat normalcy” and cultured flesh monikers laced with satire, which purposefully undermine the strategies for creating the *real* and the carniveracity of cultured flesh companies like The Beef Corporation and Eat Just.

It appears that The Beef Corporation and Eat Just are equivalent: cultured flesh companies capable of growing and harvesting *real* meat. However, as *Beef* reflects on the speculative trajectory of a fully-realised cultured flesh company, Blackwell undermines the *realness* and carniveracityof Eat Just’s *real* meat, noting that “as promising as all these efforts had been, and as cheaply and effectively as the process had been starting to become, they just hadn't been Proper Meat.”[[529]](#footnote-529) Here, Blackwell is referencing the scaffolding process currently used by companies like Eat Just, which, as Neil Stephens states, “are most suited to producing tissue akin to processed meats such as sausages and burgers that lack some of the textured complexity of highly structured meats like beef steaks or chicken breasts.”[[530]](#footnote-530) Even the *real* meat of current cultured flesh companies, then, is not *real* enough for The Beef Corporation and their consumers; they need something meatier, *realer*, to sink their teeth into. The solution to cultured flesh’s lack of *realness*: techno-skeletons. Unlike Eat Just, then, The Beef Corporation’s cultured flesh—their “actual real Proper Meat”[[531]](#footnote-531)—is not harvested from a dish or produced from a printer; instead, it is grown, exercised, and sliced from elaborate techno-skeletons, complete with artificial bones and a blood supply, that simulate the movements and viscera of an animal body:

And the sound! The squelching, the grinding, the trickling, the spurting! Situational cellular growth technology had been, despite most people’s assumptions, not some silent clinical task, but a full-blown grunting orchestra of slapping, sloppy, flesh and whirring, clanking machinery.[[532]](#footnote-532)

In all its slapping meat glorification, *Beef*’s “Proper Meat” exposes the visual, olfactory, and auditory fleshiness taking place inside animal bodies, necessary for growing *real* meat for consumption. The sounds and movements imbue the cultured flesh with a throbbing aliveness that, all at once, recalls animal bodies, while attempting to assert itself as a new ontological being, a new *real*, which has obfuscated actual animals. Similarly to Kornbluth and Pohl’s Chicken Little from *The Space Merchants*, *Beef*’s techno-skeleton is, as Miller remarks of Chicken Little, “neither animal nor plant, but rather an ontologically ambiguous principle of growth.”[[533]](#footnote-533)As the bones and blood supply stretch and oxygenate the flesh, the techno-skeleton further confirms the *realness* of The Beef Corporation’s meat; not only does it taste, smell, and look like *real* meat, but it also moves and grows like the actual animals whose cells it propagates. As the techno-skeleton performs its relentless growing and groanings, blurring the boundaries between technology and the organic, it appears to be a hybrid of both the animal body and the cultured flesh scaffold, blending the two “technologies,” in order to create *real* “Proper Meat.” However, the techno-skeleton is more akin to Baudrillard’s fragmented clone and Baker’s disarticulated body, whereby it becomes a “productive technology,” an orchestral spectacle, a feast for the eyes, while bringing an end to the singularity of the animal body.[[534]](#footnote-534) This fragmented clone, then, creates a new simulacrum of the actual animal body, a disarticulated body, whose movements can be more easily manipulated and flesh more easily harvested. The techno-skeleton’s cultured flesh is a *real* created without a reality; like the clone, it dismantles the alterity between actual animals and the scaffold, between animal flesh and cultured flesh, so that only “Proper Meat” remains. Therefore, Rene’s techno-skeleton renders Eat Just’s cultured flesh and their scaffolds a facsimile and “in vitro meat” an obsolete term, since cultured flesh’s propagation no longer occurs “under artificial conditions rather than in a living organism”[[535]](#footnote-535) or “outside of the animal body;”[[536]](#footnote-536) instead, it is grown and exercised on a *real* disarticulatedanimal body, which is simultaneously the outside andinside, obscured and exposed, estranged and indistinct. Therefore, the cultured flesh techno-skeleton that is both artificial and living, *real* and real, ensures that “Proper Meat” becomes *realer* than *real*.

With the innovation of a *realer* than *real* “Proper Meat,” the cultured flesh techno-skeleton appears to simultaneously liberateanimals from violence, by creating an animal body simulacrum, while also exposing animal flesh to new forms of violence, as the bare viscera of animal flesh is mechanically forced to move, grow, and be harvested. As such, “Proper Meat,” like Eat Just’s GOOD Meat, is engaged in the operation of the dual estrangement and indistinction between actual animals and animal flesh, between *a* cow and beef, between *a* chicken and chicken, with Blackwell’s groaning techno-skeleton a satirical and speculative expression of how to utilise the optimal balance of actual animals’ presence in cultured animal flesh for cultured flesh’s marketing and promotion. Blackwell continues to reify this careful balance between actual animals and animal flesh and manage the dual estrangement and indistinction of “Proper Meat,” through his emphasis on “Proper Meat” being “grown like animal meat,”[[537]](#footnote-537) while also being “meat meat.”[[538]](#footnote-538) In detailing Rene’s breakthrough discovery, Blackwell notes that

in order to create genuine meat-like meat with genuine meat-like qualities, the muscles also had to be physically stretched — they had to be exercised, exactly like the muscle fibres in a bona-fide organism — to properly develop. [. . .] This had been Rene’s most important contribution to the science (many believed); his understanding that to make a substance that was actually anything like animal meat, it had to be grown like animal meat.[[539]](#footnote-539)

Blackwell’s deviation from the *realness* of “meat meat” to the facsimiles of “meat-like,” “like animal meat,” and “like the muscle fibres in a bona-fide organism” momentarily distances “Proper Meat” from its animal meat counterpart and purported *realness*, whereby it seemingly becomes just another imitation of animal flesh, like “mockmeat, or notmeat, or semimeat.”[[540]](#footnote-540) However, Blackwell’s momentary departure from the *realness* of cultured flesh is actually a strategy for carefully managing the dual estrangement and indistinction of the presence of actual animals in “Proper Meat’s” cultured animal flesh. The Beef Corporation wants to ensure that we do not begin to think of this cultured flesh techno-skeleton as an actual animal, despite its simulation of the movements and viscera of an animal body; they do not want us to think that they have created “a new class of object/being—a Semi-Living—[where] there is the risk of making the Semi-Living a new class for exploitation.”[[541]](#footnote-541) Therefore, when “Proper Meat’s” exposed and moving techno-skeleton starts to become too indistinct from actual animals and the disturbing possibilities of harvesting flesh from actual animals start to enter our imaginations, Blackwell mediates our thoughts and introduces such “likeness” as a way to distil the *realness* of cultured flesh: this is *real* meat, but it is not actual animals. Actual animals, therefore, are all at once present and obfuscated from the process of growing flesh; the tensions between this estrangement and indistinction posit a dangerous perception of life: *real* animal flesh can be grown and harvested without violence, harm, or cruelty.

This lack of violence, harm, and cruelty supposedly encapsulated by cultured flesh is further explored through *Beef*’s liberated farmed cows. Blackwell continues to explore the presence of actual animals in cultured flesh, providing us with a further satirical answer to the question, “where are the actual animals in Eat Just’s *real* meat?”: they are running rampant around Australia, creating havoc and destruction, of course. The “nightcows,” as they become known, are the liberated offspring of farmed cows, evolving into the terrifying poster-child of the “animal-gone-wild.” With “beefed up” bodies and sharp horns used for defence and tunnelling, “the phenotype of ‘cow’ had very rapidly changed,”[[542]](#footnote-542) shifting “cows” from docile farmed animals to destructive wild animals in very little time. The original farmed cow liberation had been a Rene Beef publicity stunt special; therefore, “very little thought had gone into what would happen next. The idea that these big dopey bovines would very quickly turn into monstrous burrowing beasts of destruction had just not occurred to anyone, least of all Rene Beowulf Rudy Beef.”[[543]](#footnote-543) As dopey bovines become monstrous beasts, the cows’ evolution and destructive behaviour, while humorous, also captures the absence of foresight towards the lives of actual animals that cultured flesh companies claim to respect and liberate; deadly nightcows are not the ideal outcome. Therefore, while cultured flesh is promoted as a “techno-fix,” which will end the farming of animals and allow us to “respect animals,” the details of these same animals’ cultured flesh futures remain obfuscated: will they be killed, afforded sanctuary, or abandoned in the wild?

With their lack of foresight, The Beef Corporation decide to frame the nightcows as both a successful liberation of farmed animals and as a an opportunity for human culture. As the nightcows’ bodies and behaviours evolve, so, too, does their meaning in human culture. They are no longer edible animals; instead, they are predatory beasts, who capture the tension between Baudrillard’s real animals and Baker’s postmodern animal:

Having some large mammal out there who we not only couldn't control, but actually feared, had been seen as a healthy antidote to a culture that had for too long seen itself as something separate from the normal eat-or-be-eaten world of biological existence. Finally (the collective consciousness had sighed), finally humans were animals again! Finally (the Jungian ubermind had nodded sagely), finally humans were once more part of the one-ness of is-ness etc.[[544]](#footnote-544)

The nightcows’ predation of humans appears to illustrate Calarco’s position of indistinction, where, “to see oneself as potentially edible—as “meat” in the sense that Deleuze, Bacon, and Plumwood use the term—is to find oneself in a surprising, shocking alignment with animals.”[[545]](#footnote-545) However, The Beef Corporation’s manipulation of the nightcows’ behaviour for positive marketing and popularity undermines any authentic experience of indistinction that might be possible—to them it is a convenient explanation for a lack of foresight. Disaster averted, The Beef Corporation exchange deadly nightcows for natural predators, marketing fatal danger as self-aware opportunity. With the help of The Beef Corporation, not only can you continue to consume *real* meat, but you can also tap into *real* human-animal interactions, too. As the human collective applaud the destructive and dangerous behaviours of the nightcows as a route back to a “one-ness” with animals, they engage in Baudrillard’s yearning for the real—the nightcows, in the wildly evolved form, have regained access to the territory which humans lack. They become a nostalgia for territory, for the *real*, for a world of biological existence. Blackwell’s satirical tone urges cautiousness towards a position like Baudrillard’s, which attempts to “respect animals,” by imbuing them with unfettered—and unsubstantiated—access to the real. As he lingers on the “collective consciousness,” the “Jungian ubermind,” and the “one-ness of is-ness,” Blackwell exposes the nightcows’ access to the real as a laughable fabrication used by The Beef Corporation to fix their naïve mistakes and further exploit the actual animals they claim to have liberated. Therefore, rather than examples of Baudrillard’s real animals, the nightcows are examples of Baker’s postmodern animal, who is “just this ‘face of the real;’”[[546]](#footnote-546) the nightcows’ access to the real is a simulacrum. Like the humans who “have typically wanted things of animals, wanting them to be meaningful, and wanting to control and to be consoled by those meanings,”[[547]](#footnote-547) The Beef Corporation desperately want the nightcows’ evolution and behaviour to be meaningful, to grant them access to the real, and to be comforted by the “one-ness” of human-nightcow existence. As they yearn for meaning, The Beef Corporation utilise the nightcows’ fabricated access to the real to legitimate their promotion of carniveracity and promote the *realness* of their cultured flesh; their nightcows and “Proper Meat” grant access to the *real* world of biological existence, where we can all partake in the consumption of *real* meat.

## **Fake Beef**

Devoid of nightcows and cultured flesh techno-skeletons but full of farmed animals, ‘A Series of Steaks’’ Splendid Beef Enterprises seeks to eke out an inconspicuous existence as a cultured flesh company, making “fake beef and sell[ing] it to restaurants.”[[548]](#footnote-548) Unlike Eat Just and The Beef Corporation, Splendid Beef Enterprises does not offer consumers a stark choice; instead, its marketing and products are discussed secretly and consumed in ignorance. While Splendid Beef’s buyers are fully aware of the beef’s cultured flesh origins, their consumers remain unaware that their beef started life in a bioreactor; its indistinct appearance, texture, taste, and smell from animal flesh ensuring its animal origins remain haptically and texturally present, while its cultured flesh, animal celled origins are obfuscated. Splendid Beef appears to be another iteration of *real* meat, like “Proper Meat” and “GOOD Meat,” where actual animals are, all at once, present and obfuscated, estranged and indistinct. Despite this *realness*, however, Helena Li Yuanhui, unlike Rene Beef and Eat Just, describes her cultured flesh as fake meat, rather than *real* meat, more akin to “mockmeat, or notmeat, or semimeat” than “meat meat.”[[549]](#footnote-549) For her, meat’s *realness* comes from its growth in an organic, “bona-fide organism,”[[550]](#footnote-550) from its presence as a once living animal; therefore, with its cultivation of animal cells in a bioreactor, Splendid Beef—cultured flesh—is unmistakeably fake meat. Prasad’s exploration of the “fake *realness*” of cultured flesh complicates not only the *realness* of Eat Just and The Beef Corporation’s *real* meat, but also the purported fakery of Splendid Beef Enterprises’ fake beef. All of their cultured flesh is grown and harvested from the cells of animals; yet, they present and obscure the *realness* of their meat differently, in order to manage the dual estrangement and indistinction of actual animals’ presence in their cultured flesh. This development from Blackwell’s “proper meat” is important because it offers another way to undermine the dual estrangement and indistinction necessary for the *realness* of cultured flesh, the *realness* of Eat Just’s *real* meat: performance. Described as “fake beef” by its creator, while being consumed under the guise of animal flesh by its consumers, Splendid Beef suggests that cultured flesh’s *realness* is something that requires performance, rather than something innate to cultured flesh. Since cultured flesh’s *realness* risks being exposed as a performance—as “fake beef”—it troubles Eat Just’s strategy of maintaining a careful balance between the estrangement and indistinction of actual animals in their cultured flesh; despite this meticulous performance, the violent realities of actual animals’ presence in cultured flesh might be uncovered. Therefore, while Eat Just claim their cultured flesh is chicken, but it is not *a* chicken, and The Beef Corporation claim their cultured flesh is *realer* than *real*, Splendid Beef Enterprises claim their cultured flesh is not beef, and it is not *a* cow either; it is simply a performance, it is simply forgery.

Fake beef’s performative *realness* draws on Sophia Efstathiou’s concept that “meat replacement is to meat, as drag is to gender.”[[551]](#footnote-551) As meat replacement performs “realness”—in the drag use of the term—it “becomes an attribute that can be accomplished as opposed to had, and that can be exercised and performed differently according to context.”[[552]](#footnote-552) Efstathiou develops this performance and suggests, “meat replacements not only mimic meat but disclose how meat itself is performed in carnivorous culture—and show that it may be performed otherwise.”[[553]](#footnote-553) This performative “realness,” then, not only draws attention to meat replacement’s performance, but also to animal flesh’s imposed performance as meat. As Efstathiou notes, “meat—like gender—can be performed but also troubled, and that meat replacement products and practices emulate gender-troubling practices found in drag.”[[554]](#footnote-554) While Efstathiou’s focus is on meat replacements, she does briefly mention cultured flesh, suggesting that since “second-generation meat replacements are often mistaken for meat,” “this ambiguity of second-generation products also marks synthetic or cell-based laboratory meats.”[[555]](#footnote-555) However, I suggest that “fake beef’s” performative *realness* develops the performance of meat replacements, by focusing on both the dual estrangement and indistinction of actual animals in cultured flesh’s *realness*, alongside cultured flesh’s *real* meat as simulacra. While “fake beef” captures the performative *realness* of cultured flesh, it is also underwritten by the presence of actual animals’ flesh—the original—exposing that, despite this cultured performativity, cultured flesh and animal flesh are indistinct. Although still a performance, cultured flesh does not engage in “mimicry” in the same way as meat replacements; instead, it is a simulacrum, whereby the *real* becomes indistinct from the original, “leaving room only for [. . .] the simulated generation of differences.”[[556]](#footnote-556) Therefore, Helena’s insistence on the “fakeness” of Splendid Beef and its meticulous performance of meat *realness* as simulacra recalls the performance of female-to-femme drag, rather than male-to-femme drag, where cis- and trans-gendered women “critically drag femininity.”[[557]](#footnote-557) Deanna Showmaker suggests that “by explicitly marking the destructive and pleasurable labors of femininity as well as its effects from *within* the sign system of “woman,” female-to-femme drag”—“femme(nini)tease” as Showmaker terms it—“attempts to make strange what is so persistently taken to be “natural.””[[558]](#footnote-558) As such, Splendid Beef Enterprises’ “fake beef,” in its performance as *real* meat *within* the sign system of “animal flesh,” makes strange what has been seen through carniveracity as “natural, normal, fundamental, necessary, real, truthful, authentic.”[[559]](#footnote-559) Like female-to-femme drag, “fake beef’s” performance as *real* meat draws sustenance from the material presence of the original—the material presence of animal flesh—within the performance, while simultaneously complicating the distinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh; even in performance, they are indistinct. As we watch this performance, it becomes uncertain where the original ends and the *real* begins, where actual animals end and cultured flesh begins; cultured flesh has become a simulacra of animal flesh, where it is no longer possible to discern the real from the *real*.

Fake beef’s performance, therefore, strangely complicates Eat Just’s own strategies of making present and obfuscating actual animals in their *real* meat; through “fake beef” we begin to see the indistinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh. As in female-to-femme drag, in “fake beef,” the original is always present in the *real*, even as it is obfuscated; therefore, “fake beef’s” performance offers us not only an understanding of cultured flesh as a performance of meat, but also a reading of cultured flesh as simulacra, whereby the indistinctions between cultured flesh and animal flesh are made present. As Showmaker suggests, “femme(nini)tease carves out a space for queer desire, queers heterofemininity and potentially infuses drag performances with a feminist consciousness often missing from gay and straight male drag.”[[560]](#footnote-560) Perhaps, then, “fake beef’s” exposure as a performance of *real* meat, where cultured flesh is a simulacrum and as such recalls the material presence of the original, carves—both figuratively and physically—a space for ethical desire—rather than the “techno-fix” desire that Eat Just offers. Fake beef infuses performances of *real* meat with an indistinct consciousness, which, not present in meat replacement’s performance of meat, seeks to highlight the indistinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh and make present the suffering and exploitation of actual animals with(in) cultured flesh. “Fake beef’s” *real* meat, then, offers not just a route to exposing the performativity of *real* meat, but also offers both a route to the indistinction of cultured flesh and animal flesh and to locating the actual animal within *real* meat.

As Helena “forgers” fake beef from actual animal cell lines, she produces a *real* from the original—a simulacrum—that, through its performativity, makes present the indistinctions between cultured flesh and animal flesh. A master forger, Helena is meticulous about both the secrecy of her production and the appearance, texture, taste, and smell of Splendid Beef. The forged beef must be texturally and visually indistinct from animal flesh—a marbled, chewy, and unique facsimile of a slaughtered animal steak—able to perform *realness* publiclyfor consumers, even as it is renounced as fake privately by its creator:

Forging beef is similar to printmaking—every step of the process has to be done with the final print in mind. A red that’s too dark looks putrid, a white that’s too pure looks artificial. All beef is supposed to come from a cow, so stipple the red with dots, flecks, lines of white to fake variance in muscle fiber regions. Cows are similar, but cows aren’t uniform—use fractals to randomize marbling after defining the basic look. Cut the sheets of beef manually to get an authentic ragged edge, don’t get lazy and depend on the bioprinter for that.[[561]](#footnote-561)

Throughout the forgery, Helena strives to offset the uniform artificiality of cultured flesh with the unique authenticity of animal flesh, with each randomised marbling and variated fleck a marker of fake beef’s performative *realness*. In its manipulated individuality and manufactured authenticity, then, Splendid Beef exposes not only fake beef’s performance as *real* meat, but also cultured flesh’s role as simulacra, making present the actual animals whose flesh is printed and marbled. As red flesh and white fat intertwine, each steak is presented as similarly unique, performing its textural and visual *realness*, alongside its ontological *realness* as a cow; as we are reminded, “all beef is supposed to come from a cow.” Slicing the fake beef into ragged edged slices, Splendid Beef recalls, too, the butchering of actual animals, in all its visceral detail, as part of its performance as *real* meat; like Showmaker’s femme(nini)tease that “critically drag[s] femininity,”[[562]](#footnote-562) cultured flesh’s performance of actual animal butchery, critically drags carniveracity. Therefore, unlike Eat Just, who carefully obfuscate these images of butchered animals, Splendid Beef Enterprises reveal these exposed acts of violence as part of fake beef’s performative *realness*, in order to draw indistinctions between cultured flesh and animal flesh and locate the actual animals in fake beef. This butchery is as intrinsic to cultured flesh’s performative *realness* as the textural, visual, and gustatory performances promoted by Eat Just. Ragged edges or not, the butchery of actual animals undercuts the *realness* of fake beef. Animal flesh and cultured flesh, therefore, become indistinct, not only through their material origins but also through their performativity, as exposed, butchered, and manufactured authenticity.

For Helena’s fake beef to swirl in mouths and slip down gullets unnoticed, not only does the fake beef need to perform *real* meat, but it also needs to operate with secrecy and discretion; as she comments, “all known forgeries are tales of failure.”[[563]](#footnote-563) The trick to executing this clandestine operation is to print a perfect facsimile of different cuts of beef from actual animal cells and, as she notes, “not to get too ambitious.”[[564]](#footnote-564) With small-scale jobs, a discreet client base, and a successful product, Helena ensures that her fake beef business remains mostly hidden from public view, performing *real* meat without suspicion. As she notes,

the best forgeries are the ones that disappear from notice—a second-rate still-life moldering away in gallery storage, a battered old 50-yuan note at the bottom of a cashier drawer—or even a printed strip of Matsusaka beef, sliding between someone’s parted lips.[[565]](#footnote-565)

As fake beef slides between parted lips, we bear witness to the performance of fake beef as *real* meat, of Splendid Beef as cultured Matsusaka beef. Accompanying Matsusaka beef in Helena’s list of forgeries are art and money—two key components of Splendid Beef Enterprises’ successful operation. With successfully forged art decaying and money remaining obfuscated, these accompanying forgeries capture Helena’s vision of Splendid Beef: it decays unnoticed inside satisfied stomachs. Furthermore, Prasad’s focus on Matsusaka beef further complicates fake beef’s performance as *real* meat and the indistinction of cultured flesh and animal flesh, due to its expensive and intimate presentation. One of Japan’s top three luxury beefs, Matsusaka has a “fine marbling of fat, whose low melting point lends to a divine “melt in your mouth” quality.” [[566]](#footnote-566) Accompanying this tender exclusivity are unique cow identification numbers on stickers. When looked up on the database, these numbers, unique to each animal, display the cow’s beef certificate complete with an ink noseprint, date of birth, pedigree, and the place they were raised. Customers are encouraged to check the details of their Matsusaka in restaurants and “stickers displaying it are also attached to Matsusaka beef sold at supermarkets, butchers, and souvenir shops.”[[567]](#footnote-567) As Matsusaka beef intimately recalls actual animals in its casual presentation, fake beef’s performance as *real* Matsusaka recalls the ontological presence of these actual animals, too. As noseprints are replaced by randomised marbling and identification numbers become printer calibrations, fake beef asserts an indistinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh—and, indeed, technological thing flesh (printers, ink, tags, etc.)—whereby *real* meat constantly exposes the presence of actual animals in cultured flesh in uncomfortable and disturbing ways.

Despite Helena’s insistence on the facsimileing of her “fake beef,” its *realness* is a topic of contestation, for colleagues, clients, and consumers alike. When Helena explains Splendid Beef Enterprises’ fake beef creations, Lily Yonezawa (Helena’s newly recruited assistant) assumes that Helena is producing “soy-lentil stuff,”[[568]](#footnote-568) rather than cultured flesh, establishing a substantial division between soy beef and cultured beef, which Helena disputes. Both Helena and Lily consume one variation of the “soy-lentil stuff” that Lily is referring to: Zhuzhu’s char siew noodles, which, complete with crumbly textured “fake pork fragments,” are made from “extruded soy proteins.”[[569]](#footnote-569) Despite their opposing composition and production methods, Helena refers to both Splendid Beef and ZhuZhu’s soy protein as fake meat, both attempted facsimiles of meat, both forgeries of the *real* thing—even if Helena’s are more successful in appearance, texture, and taste. As Helena explains that Splendid Beef is made from ““homegrown cloned cell lines [. . .]. Mostly Matsusaka, with some Hereford, if clients specify it.” She gestures at the bioreactor humming away in a corner,”[[570]](#footnote-570) Lily contests the supposed “fakeness” of Splendid Beef: “wait, isn’t fake food like those knockoff eggs made of calcium carbonate? If you’re using cow cells, this seems pretty real to me.”[[571]](#footnote-571) Citing the cow cells—the material traces of actual animals—in her assertion of the “pretty real” nature of fake beef, Lily reifies the indistinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh, and complicates the dual estrangement and indistinction of actual animals necessary for cultured flesh’s performance as *real* meat. Just like Splendid Beef’s consumers, Lily suggests that there are no distinctions between fake beef and animal flesh; the visual, textural, gustatory, and cultural experiences of fake beef and animal flesh are indistinct, alongside the butchering, performativity, and material traces of actual animals which are exposed through fake beef. Cultured flesh companies, like Eat Just, wish to keep the former indistinctions present and the latter estranged, for fear that their “techno-fix” promises will be complicated; however, as fake beef’s performance as *real* meat demonstrates, cultured flesh is a simulacra of animal flesh, whereby it is no longer possible to discern *real* meat from animal flesh, the simulacrum from the real. Therefore, despite Helena’s presentation of cultured flesh as “fake beef,” its animal origins, performative *realness*, and fleshy indistinctions suggest that Splendid Beef Enterprises’ beef is animal flesh from actual animals.

Whether through techno-skeletons or printed steaks, the texts’ “delirious apotheosis of a productive technology,” highlights the performativity of *real* meat and the indistinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh. In doing so, the texts undermine the strategies of Eat Just, who aim to ensure that actual animals’ presence in their cultured flesh is, all at once, present and hidden, celebrated and obfuscated, actual and *real*. In addition to recalling the presence of actual animals through performativity, the texts also explore the haunting presence of cultured flesh, which transmits a traumatic legacy between fleshes.

## **Corpse Meat**

Like Baudrillard’s clone story, where the clone is “an imaginary figure, which [. . .] haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always averted death,”[[572]](#footnote-572) cultured flesh in *Beef* and ‘A Series of Steaks’ takes on a haunting presence, generating, manifesting, and transmitting a traumatic legacy of flesh between cultured flesh, animal flesh, and human flesh, too. As a simulacrum, cultured flesh bears the infinite ontological traces of animal flesh that linger, transform, and recall the averted death of actual animals, while also serving as a haunting reminder to actual animals that their averted death is always conditional. Furthermore, I argue that cultured flesh, too, is haunted by the obfuscated presence of actual animals, whose traumatic utterances threaten to complicate the elaborate marketing strategies of cultured flesh companies like Eat Just. To visualise this simultaneous haunting presence of the traumatic legacy of flesh, we can turn to Sue Coe’s ‘Modern Man Followed by the Ghosts of His Meat’ (1990), which features a man carrying a McDonald’s burger bag, while being followed by the spectral presence of cows, pigs, sheep, a goat, and a chicken. Looking uneasily back at the animals, he is positioned in front of a butcher’s shop, which features cuts of animal flesh underneath the word “butcher.” With his trail of farmed phantoms and his un-happy meal, the man—and the meat eaters he represents—is exposed as the butcher, forever haunted by the actual animals he has consumed. Clearly, there is a haunting presence implicit in flesh, which manifests—like the animal spectres—as the traumatic legacy of flesh. By replacing the McDonald’s bag of Coe’s painting with Eat Just’s GOOD Meat, *Beef*’s Proper Meat, or ‘A Series of Steaks’’ Fake Beef, we can visualise the haunting presence of both cultured flesh and actual animals (the traumatic legacy of flesh) that is inherently tied to the materiality, production, consumption, performance, and marketing of cultured flesh as *real* meat. As actual animals are recalled and obfuscated in *real* meat, the traumatic legacy of flesh becomes a further route to indistinction, forcing us to confront the eternal presence of actual animals in *real* meat and the indistinction between animal flesh and cultured flesh.

Through simulated and vicarious consumption, traumatic and pleasurable spectacles, and violent technologies, Blackwell and Prasad explore the traumatic legacy of flesh, tracing the relationship between cultured flesh and a haunting presence, between *real* meat and actual animals. The texts illustrate how actual animals are forever embedded in cultured flesh’s *real* meat, since actual animals’ flesh lives on in the materiality and experience of cultured flesh ad infinitum. Whenever cultured flesh is present and consumed, the possibility that actual animals will once again be killed for their flesh remains and is expressed through the traumatic legacy of flesh. Therefore, the traumatic legacy of flesh troubles the dual estrangement and indistinction between cultured flesh and its animal flesh originator, since it reifies actual animals’ sustained presence in cultured flesh. As the texts explore clandestine consumption and obfuscated abuses, they show that cultured flesh and actual animals bear the imprints of the traumatic legacy of flesh and carry it between both cultured, animal, and human flesh.

Half archival footage, half horror show, “meatmovies” are both a widely kept secret and a widely viewed material, providing the inhabitants of *Beef* with a filmed traumatic legacy of flesh on which to feast their horrified eyes. Everyone from politicians and religious leaders to celebrities and porn stars would deny having viewed them, even though, “most people generally had.”[[573]](#footnote-573) The meatmovies “were nothing but crudely edited compilations of old footage of people from the pre-vat era, eating meat.”[[574]](#footnote-574) Since flesh consumption—albeit the cultured flesh kind—continues in the “vat era” of *Beef*, the initial presentation of the meatmovies does not appear to necessitate such secrecy or be considered “so sinister, so thrilling, and so downright freaky to watch.”[[575]](#footnote-575) However, as Royston comments, “the meatmovies were totally ordinary to look at, unless you knew what was really going on;”[[576]](#footnote-576) in the meat movies, people partake in the consumption of animal flesh, of “the muscles and skin of actual cadavers,” of corpse-meat.[[577]](#footnote-577) It becomes clear, then, why the widespread secrecy of their viewership would be upheld; no one wants to be caught partaking vicariously in the consumption of animal flesh. Like Eat Just’s marketing videos, the meatmovies allow their viewers to partake in the consumption of animal flesh, even if, publicly, they renounce their consumption. These simulated experiences invoke a freakish, sinister, and thrilling spectacle of consumption, where they reveal the dual operation of the meatmovies: trauma and pleasure. In the compiled scenes of the meatmovies, then, trauma and pleasure, violence and indifference, butchery and consumption, bleed into one another, simultaneously capturing “non-stop necrophagy” and “some kind of perverse slapstick.”[[578]](#footnote-578) For *Beef*’s inhabitants, there is a tension between the trauma and pleasure of these meatmovie spectacles; they look on in disgust and horror, but they are unwilling to turn away from these freakish delights.

Like Coe’s original painting, the meatmovies capture the haunting presence implicit to flesh, through the traumatic legacy of animal flesh. However, the traumatic legacy of flesh is not contained to animal flesh in old celluloid screens or violent archival renderings; instead, it permeates into this speculative future of cultured flesh, where cultured flesh expresses the traumatic legacy of flesh, through the performative parody of meatmovies. Looking for ways to promote The Beef Corporation, Gene suggests creating an advert based on a twisted meatmovie:

Gene's idea was total genius: “I was thinking that our first video clip should look like a meatmovie,” she said. [. . .] “I can totally see it. I'd be like munching down on all these different cuts of meat, with that same eerie fucking innocent vibe they’ve got in those old meatmovies. You know, that ‘everything is normal’ happy smile kind of thing? And we make it with lots of edits to mimic that cut-up compilation kinda thing.” She grinned. “All those lingering juicy close-ups of my mouth. It'll go ballistic.” “Massive viral smash. Absolutely perfect.”[[579]](#footnote-579)

As imagined teeth tear into cultured flesh and fictional juice runs down Gene’s mouth, Gene and Royston aim to simulate the meatmovies in content, form, performance, and mood. Speculative viewers will watch this marketed meatmovie, partaking, once again, in the consumption of animal flesh; this time, however, their traumatic response is seemingly resolved, when it is revealed that Gene is, in fact, tearing into cultured flesh. They look on in disgust and horror, revelling in the pleasure of these seemingly ethical freakish delights. However, despite the appearance that ‘everything is normal,’ Gene’s meatmovie performance, with its further simulacrum of old footage, illustrates the traumatic legacy of flesh that is indistinctly present in and transferred between both cultured flesh and animal flesh. The meatmovie advert’s effectiveness relies on both the visual, textural, and experiential indistinction of cultured flesh and animal flesh—in different cuts of meat and juicy close-ups—as well as the material indistinction—the indiscernible performance of the original by the simulacrum. As we imagine these manifold indistinctions unfolding in front of our eyes, the eerie innocence of the meatmovies is replaced by disturbing knowledge of cultured flesh’s indistinction from animal flesh; just like the pre-vat era humans, Gene—and all the other characters in *Beef*—partake in animal flesh, where their cultured flesh creations haunt actual animals with “a subtle and always averted death.”[[580]](#footnote-580)

Meatmovies are not the only violent archival renderings to explore the traumatic legacy of flesh, in *Beef*; instead, in a disturbing and surreptitious meeting between Royston and his father, Reginald, we are faced with a scrap of mummified animal flesh that captures both a yearning for the real via actual animals and the expression of the traumatic legacy of flesh, which haunts human, animal, and cultured flesh. Reginald leads Royston into his study, where he reaches for a small, locked wooden box. Inside the box, lies a secret—a traumatic part of himself—that Reginald has never revealed to anyone before:

Inside, was a tiny scrap of… well, Royston had no idea. It looked like some old dried scrap of twisted black shit. “It's… poo?” “God almighty.” Reggie sighed. “And you're the good one.” “It's... um... it's…” “It's meat.” “Oh.” “From an animal, Royston. It's corpse meat.” Royston dropped the box. It clattered sharply, making him jump, and the small mummified fragment of ancient flesh was thrown to the floor. Swearing under his breath, Reggie chased it, picked it up, put it in the box, and closed it. [[581]](#footnote-581)

Absented of all its visible and haptic fleshiness, the mummified animal flesh’s identity is not immediately obvious. It lies there in the box, entirely ambiguous, with its dryness helping to both preserve and conceal its fleshy form—it is so far removed from its vital animal origin that Royston likens it to faeces. As realisation of the mummified flesh’s origin surfaces—moving from faeces to cultured flesh to actual animal—Royston experiences the traumatic legacy of flesh, as butchered animal flesh affects horrified human flesh. By dropping the box in his horror, the ancient flesh takes on a previously denied liveliness, rolling around on the floor, with Reginald chasing it in a panic, as his secret threatens to reveal itself to those outside the room. He locks it back into the box, securing the mummified flesh in its tomb. In its tomb-like preservation, Reginald’s animal flesh fragment takes on a haunting presence, capturing the horror of a memorialised serial killer momentum, which exists as a reminder of his murderous past and the haunting actual animal spectres of Coe’s painting. He keeps the flesh locked within his desk drawer, as both a secret and a constant reminder of flesh’s traumatic legacy, showing it to his son to release fragments of the burden. Reginald admits to Royston that “this was the last piece. I had to keep some. To remind me. Remind me of what I'd done.”[[582]](#footnote-582) Not only did Reginald memorialise a piece of animal flesh, but he memorialised the “last” piece of animal flesh he ever ate. The fragmented flesh carries the trauma of all the actual animals Reginald consumed over his three years of corpse-eating. Reginald continues, telling Royston of how “it ate at my soul, Royston. The meat was eating me.”[[583]](#footnote-583) Through this consumption imagery, Reginald captures how “trauma also appears to be worryingly transmissible.”[[584]](#footnote-584) As Reginald consumed the flesh of actual animals, the traumatic legacy of all those animals flowed back into him, continuing to consume his flesh long after its fragmented flesh had been concealed in a box.

This mummified piece of animal flesh also acts as a performative yearning for the real via actual animals. Not only does this scrap of animal flesh represent the actual animal who was killed for its creation, but it also represents a yearning for access to the real, for access to real meat that has been replaced by the Beef Corporation’s *real* meat. However, like the nightcows, this scrap of mummified animal flesh is simply a “face of the real,”[[585]](#footnote-585) since animals’ access to the real is itself a simulacrum. In this moment of human yearning, then, we are, once again, reminded of Eat Just’s use of animals as an access point to the real that can be manipulated to promote the *realness* of their cultured flesh. Like Reginald’s mummified animal flesh, actual animals are a way of imbuing Eat Just’s GOOD Meat with *realness*, and as such actual animals are both intrinsic to and obfuscated from cultured flesh’s marketing, ontological identity, and consumption. *Beef*’s traumatic legacy of flesh undermines Eat Just’s dual estrangement and indistinction of the actual animal in their *real* meat; even though Reginald believes this is the “last” piece of animal flesh that he will eat, its material presence lives on and is consumed through The Beef Corporation’s Proper Meat ad infinitum. Therefore, as this scrap of dried animal flesh is obfuscated inside a box, pulsating cultured flesh haunts it like its other, bearing the ontological and traumatic traces of actual animals. As such, there are no distinctions between animal flesh and cultured flesh—like Reginald and Royston believe; instead, there is only the simulated generation of differences. *Beef* highlights the indistinct ontology and the shared traumatic legacy of flesh between animal flesh and cultured flesh: consuming *real* meat entails consuming actual animals, too.

## **Purebred Hereford**

Despite Helena’s attempts to keep Splendid Beef Enterprises’ fake beef operations clandestine, through small-scale operations, she receives a threatening phone call from “Mr. Anonymous,” who demands an order of two hundred T-bone steaks, 38.1 to 40.2 millimetre thickness, by the 8th of August. The specification for the steaks: “16-18month cow, grain fed, Hereford breed.”[[586]](#footnote-586) Initially, Helena refuses Mr. Anonymous’ demanding and vague order, stating “we’re a printing company, not a farm;”[[587]](#footnote-587) however, with his threats of violence and exposure, Helena and Lily are forced to comply with his demands. As they begin working on this order Helena and Lily encounter the traumatic legacy of flesh and uncover the actual animals’ suffering that haunts their cultured flesh cover-up. Creating intricately marbled and physiologically complex T-bone steaks proves challenging for Helena, since there are very little references of how the bone and flesh adhere together. With limited source material,

Helena’s left to extrapolate from blurry videos and password-protected previews of bovine myology databases, which don’t get her much closer to figuring out how the meat adheres to the bone. Helena’s forced to dig through ancient research papers and diagrams that focus on where to cut to maximize meat yield, quantifying the difference between porterhouse and T-bone cuts, and not *hey, if you’re reading this decades in the future, here’s how to make a good facsimile of a steak*.[[588]](#footnote-588)

Like *Beef*’s meatmovies, Helena accesses animal flesh through violent archival renderings—whether photos, databases, diagrams, or research papers—which obscure animal flesh as much as they make it present. In each of these renderings, only traces of animal flesh remain, and Helena attempts to piece them together to produce her T-bone steak. As she peels through diagrams of how to butcher different cuts of meat, the traumatic legacy of flesh seeps out and recalls the violence emitted by the butchering of actual animals. When creating fake beef, Helena relies on the presence of actual animals and the violence inflicted on them. Through the T-bone, therefore, not only will animal flesh live on in its materiality, but the traumatic legacy of flesh, passed from actual animal to archival rendering to cultured flesh, will proliferate endlessly. Furthermore, Prasad engages with a moment of meta-speculation, when she satirically imagines the content of the archive and the archivist who might conceptualise a future where someone might want to use the myology database to create “a good facsimile of a steak.” In its speculative humour, this meta-speculation is camply self-referential; with its parodical humour, it infuses a critical distance, whereby we are able to expose the traumatic legacy of flesh, while also exposing the satirically excessive processes behind the creation and performance of *real* meat.

As if in response to this meta-speculation, Helena is surprised to find Lily one morning, with a fully formed T-bone steak on her screen. Unlike Helena’s source material, Lily’s is much clearer, combining the physiology of human flesh with the materiality of animal flesh: ““it’s a little like the human vertebral column, isn’t it? There’s plenty of references for that.” She taps the screen twice, switching focus to an image of a human cross-section. “See how it attaches here and here? I just used that as a reference, and boom.””[[589]](#footnote-589) With human physiology and animal materiality rendered in cultured flesh, Lily’s T-bone steak “haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again.”[[590]](#footnote-590) Lily’s T-bone is, all at once, real flesh and *real* flesh, human and animal vertebral column and fake beef. In this moment of indistinction, whether physiological or material, human and animal flesh live on ad infinitum, through cultured flesh, haunting them “like a subtle and always averted death.”[[591]](#footnote-591)

With their T-bone steaks almost ready for printing, Helena and Lily grow increasingly suspicious about the identity of Mr Anonymous and the purpose of their two hundred steaks. They uncover the identity of both Mr Anonymous and the actual animals of the T-Bone steaks—vertical farmer, Dominic Cai and his disease-ridden herd of Hereford cows—through more recent violent technologies and archival renderings of actual animals:

Helena fast-forwards through the introduction of *Modern Manufacturing: The Vertical Farmer*, which involves the camera panning upwards through hundreds of vertically-stacked wire cages. Dominic Cai talks to the host in English, boasting about how he plans to be a key figure in China’s domestic beef industry. He explains his “patented methods” for a couple of minutes, which involves stating and restating that his farm is extremely clean and filled with only the best cattle.[[592]](#footnote-592)

With cows stacked in cages above one another, in this speculative farming future, Dominic Cai (Mr Anonymous) introduces us to another “techno-fix,” a new trend currently emerging in twenty-first century factory farming, where the traumatic legacy of flesh bleeds from every floor: the vertical animal farm. Built five years after ‘A Series of Steaks’ was published, standing twenty-six stories high, and due to contain twenty-thousand pigs, China’s Hubei is home to a non-speculative vertical pig farm. In an uncomfortably similar video to the speculative “*Modern Manufacturing: The Vertical Farmer*” programme, New China TV’s camera pans the outside of the vertical farm in all its concrete grandiosity, where the narrator asks, “can you imagine what a pig farm in the future would be like?”[[593]](#footnote-593) Pondering this question, we are invited into this future farm, led around by Jin Lin, the general manager of Zhongxin Kaiwei Modern Farming Co. Ltd.. Clad in personal protective equipment, Jin Lin explains the inner workings of this vertical farm, while the camera offers close-up shots of sanitised surfaces. Cameras inside the farm abound, overseeing every corner from a central control system. Pigs mill around on multiple screens, while one camera looks out from the top of the vertical pig farm, capturing the sheer enormity of its concrete stature from this high level shot. Through this “modern farm,” Prasad’s speculative horrors have come to life. As pacing pigs replace stacked cows, these shared vertically farmed animals expose the violent technologies that assist in the perpetuation, retention, and generation of the traumatic legacy of flesh. Therefore, in vertical farms, we begin to experience the haunting presence of the traumatic legacy of flesh, as it seeps from actual animals.

As the speculative “*Modern Manufacturing: The Vertical Farmer*” continues, the interviewer asks Cai some pressing questions concerning sanitation and the possibility of bovine parasitic cancer in the cramped conditions of the vertical farm:

“As I’ve said, our hygiene standards are impeccable, and our stock is purebred Hereford!” Cai slaps the flank of a cow through the cage bars, and it moos irritatedly in response. “There is absolutely no way it could happen here!” Helena does some mental calculations. Aired last year, when the farm recently opened, and that cow looks around six months old . . . and now a request for steaks from cows that are sixteen to eighteen months old . . . “So,” Lily says, leaning on the back of Helena’s chair. “Bovine parasitic cancer?” “Judging by the timing, it probably hit them last month. It’s usually the older cows that get infected first. He’d have killed them to stop the spread . . . but if it’s the internal strain, the tumors would have made their meat unusable after excision. His first batch of cows was probably meant to be for the wedding dinner. What we’re printing is the cover-up.””[[594]](#footnote-594)

At the mention of bovine parasitic cancer, it soon becomes clear what Helena and Lily’s job is: transform the diseased actual animals in the vertical farm into palatable and perfectly printed T-bone steaks of *real* meat. Cai has co-opted Helena and Lily into the dual estrangement and indistinction of actual animals in cultured flesh; their Hereford T-bones will be texturally, visually, gustatorily, and materially indistinct from actual animals, but they will estrange these vertically farmed actual animals in disease, (un)aliveness, welfare, and ethics. At every stage of this vertically farmed and cultured flesh process, actual animals will be both present and obfuscated from Splendid Beef Enterprises’ fake beef. As we watch the interview, for a brief moment, amidst Cai’s painstaking reiteration of the farm’s sanitation, we catch sight of the vertically farmed Hereford cows, the cows to whose diseased flesh the T-bones are being made to cover, the actual animals within cultured flesh. As Cai slaps the cow’s imprisoned flank and she moos in response, we are granted fleeting access to the auditory expression of her trauma; as the months progress in the vertical farm, the trauma of her captivity, disease, and death transform into the traumatic legacy of flesh, which lodges itself inside her “unusable” flesh and haunts the cultured flesh of Splendid Beef Enterprises’ T-bone steaks. Even in these sanitised T-bones, a haunting trace of the diseased and dying Hereford cows remains, oozing out from every raw edge and speculative bite. As tumours and parasites leek out of this now “unusable” flesh, they disrupt the marbling pattern of the steaks, bending lines of fat into new forms and halting the performance of the cow’s flesh as a sanitised, modern manufactured piece of real meat. Therefore, the performance of the real meat of these vertically farmed Hereford cows is cast to cultured flesh, where it performs as *real* meat, forever haunted by and haunting the presence of the actual Hereford cows to which it covers up. Splendid Beef Enterprises’ cultured flesh cover-up haunts the actual animals of the vertical farm, reminding them that their presence—and their deaths—are easily obfuscated. Even as actual animals’ traumatised flesh rots away, their consumption and edibility lives on in cultured flesh—their trauma has been rendered palatable.

As the traumatic legacy of flesh bleeds from these mummified and marbled fleshes, in *Beef* and ‘A Series of Steaks,’ it offers a route to indistinction, one where actual animals and cultured flesh are enduringly edible, where their shared traumatic traces ripple throughout their flesh, and where actual animals are shown to be endlessly present in *real* meat. Therefore, the traumatic legacy of flesh troubles the dual estrangement and indistinction of actual animals by cultured flesh companies. As the texts explore the traumatic legacy of flesh and the performativity of *real* meat in even more extrapolated and visceral detail, they offer a critique of the carniveracity of Eat Just and provide an alternative mode of viewing and experiencing the traumatic legacy of flesh.

## **IT’S ALIVE**

Confronted by cultured flesh’s haunting and actual animals’ trauma in both *Beef* and *As Series of Steaks*, it appears that only pain can be derived from these fleshy interactions. However, Emelia Quinn proposes vegan camp “as an aesthetic lens and sensibility that, while acknowledging the extremity of animal suffering, seeks to draw sustenance from what has previously only cause pain.”[[595]](#footnote-595) Tracing examples from Scrimshaw to Lady Gaga’s meat dress to mock meat, Quinn offers vegan camp as a way to “further disrupt ideas about what it means to be human,”[[596]](#footnote-596) by showcasing “the artifice and spectacle of human exceptionalism.”[[597]](#footnote-597) Vegan camp, Quinn argues, also exposes vegan complicity in animal suffering, while satirising the horror of animal suffering and mocking human exceptionalism.[[598]](#footnote-598) Ultimately, vegan camp offers vegans “the ability to revel in the instability of human attachments to meat, in the paradoxical nature of the desire to consume and understand nonhuman animals, and to accept the impossibility of a pure or complete veganism.”[[599]](#footnote-599) Therefore, vegan camp provides a rubric for responding to the *realness* and consumption of cultured flesh; we can, all at once, interrogate the presence and obfuscation of actual animals and their subsequent traumatic presence in cultured flesh, while deriving pleasure from these disturbing performances of cultured flesh’s creation and consumption.

In Quinn’s analysis of mock meats, she suggests that “mock meats allow for an active embrace of the symbolic meanings of meat and an overinvestment in its surface appearance and taste.”[[600]](#footnote-600) Cultured flesh extrapolates this overinvestment, drawing on the *realness* of its materiality and cultural experience, whereby actual animals, whose flesh is intrinsic to cultured flesh’s creation, are performed in the pulsating techno-skeletons of “a bona-fide organism”[[601]](#footnote-601) and the randomised marbling of Splendid Beef. With screaming vat-creatures and cartoon filled steaks, both Blackwell and Prasad’s texts generate moments of excess that are ripe for vegan camp readings. In order to satirise cultured flesh companies, vertical farmers, and their cultured flesh consumers, they acknowledge and dramatically expose the suffering of actual animals necessary for the *realness* of cultured flesh, creating a satirical spectacle of carniveracity. While pulsating cultured flesh expresses suffering to excess, hidden within perfectly printed steaks are camp renderings of cartoon cows. As they revel in extrapolated displays of speculative suffering and satire, exposing the *realness* of their meat, they encourage us to find “pleasure and enjoyment derived from satirizing human exceptionalism as much as an acknowledgement of our implication in its structures.”[[602]](#footnote-602) In other words, they encourage us to view these cultured flesh displays through vegan camp. Therefore, as we partake in Blackwell and Prasad’s disturbing displays of suffering, vegan camp ensures that our own complicity “affords a temporary mode of ethical affiliation, a way of occupying the present that acknowledges rather than castigates feelings of failure and insufficiency.”[[603]](#footnote-603)

In *Beef*, fulfilling his role as PR Supervisor for The Beef Corporation, Royston takes Gene to the opening of a new vat-meat lab-factory in Gippsland, Australia, where Royston will talk to watchful media, as the first piece of Proper Meat is carved from this new lab-factory’s techno-skeletons. When Royston and Gene arrive, they “enter the lab-factory meatvaults. Into the heart and soul of situational cellular growth technologies. Into the dark place where flesh was formed. Into the crucible of creation itself.”[[604]](#footnote-604) In fleshy language, Blackwell forms the insides of the lab-factory, combining the capital, technology, production, aliveness, perpetuity, and the “delirious apotheosis”[[605]](#footnote-605) intrinsic to The Beef Corporation’s creation of Proper Meat. Whether vault, dark place, or crucible, each spatial descriptor is haunted by flesh. Walking within the heart and soul of situational cellular growth technologies, Gene begins to sense a larger haunting presence bleeding from the lab-factory’s viscera:

Gene closed her eyes and steadied herself. “I've never felt this before. This is epic. This place is soooo haunted.” “Haunted!” Salty Red Leather-face chuckled, her face a comedy caricature of a person surprised. “Should we break out the garlic, love?” “That's vampires,” she said, “and no, it's cool. These ghosts are very, very peaceful. But massive!”[[606]](#footnote-606)

Once again, like Coe’s painting, a large trail of spectres haunt this butcher’s shop, peacefully making their presence known through traumatic utterances in Gene’s flesh. Feeling the haunting call of flesh rippling through her own, Gene shudders in anticipation, readying herself to expose the presence that lies within the lab-factory. Despite her reading of these haunting presences in the lab-factory, not everyone is as invested in Gene’s psychic abilities as Royston. The crudely nicknamed general manager, “Leather-face,” attempts to patronise and ridicule Gene’s psychic abilities; however, she deftly dismisses these attempts, countering ridicule with sincerity. With Gene’s haunting experience interrupted by Leather-face’s interjection, Blackwell produces a moment ripe for vegan camp reading, where we can use vegan camp’s aesthetic lens to laugh “at carnivorous culture’s jokes, but for different reasons.”[[607]](#footnote-607) Leather-face’s intertextual reference begins to destabilise The Beef Corporation’s carniveracity and mock her denial of the traumatic legacy of flesh that seeps from the lab-factory. Referencing the saw-wielding cannibal and butcher of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), Leather-face’s intertextual presence signals an overinvestment in *real* meat’s surface appearance and cultural significance;[[608]](#footnote-608) Proper Meat’s butchery requires a skinned-face-mask-wearing, saw-wielding cannibal to perform its *realness*.

The media gathers, ready to watch this rare performance of slicing *real* meat from techno-skeletons. As blades hum and flesh pulsates, the audience bear witness to the violent show of butchery, trauma emerging from every bona-fide wail:

Ms Leather-face had never been so proud, you could see in in her face beneath the plastic protective visor. She opened the flange, folded down the access chute, and started up the saw. But as she touched the whirring blade to the meat, and the pale skin of the vat-flesh parted with a fine spray of blood, the chamber was torn by a desperate scream—

—Gene's scream—

—Gene's strangled voice—

—shrieking—

“STOP! YOU'RE HURTING IT!”

—sobbing—

—running—

“YOU'RE HURTING IT! PLEASE! STOP!”

—and her face, contorted in utter unspeakable horror—

—white—

—gaping—

“IT'S ALIVE.”

—eyes wide in total shock.[[609]](#footnote-609)

With these massive but peaceful ghosts abounding, their subtle whispers become lurid screams, as blades carve deep into flesh; Gene has exposed the source of the haunting presence of the lab-factory’s traumatic legacy of flesh: cultured flesh. This extrapolated display of fleshy suffering calls forth the presence of actual animals in cultured flesh in shrieks, screams, and strangulations, which flow through flesh. These shrieks, that flow from actual animals to cultured flesh to humans, offer a momentary site of indistinction; as Baudrillard notes, through tortured confessions, “we are all animals, and laboratory animals, whom one continually tests in order to extort their reflex behaviors [sic].”[[610]](#footnote-610) Therefore, this overkilled display of fleshy suffering captures the transmissibility of the traumatic legacy of flesh. The revelation of cultured flesh’s aliveness also recalls Eat Just’s attempt to obfuscate the aliveness of actual animals in their *real* meat. In this screaming exhibition, it is no longer possible to obfuscate this aliveness; instead, the actual animals call forth from their technological confines for all to hear and we finally understand that “to create *real* meat, Rene Beowulf Rudy Beef had created real organisms [my emphasis].”[[611]](#footnote-611) As we acknowledge the extremity of animal suffering, present in both these cultured flesh beings and the actual animals that they are harvested, cultured, and obfuscated from, Quinn suggests that we should use vegan camp to engage in “an alternative mode of looking and witnessing, one that does not exclusively focus on revelations of violence.”[[612]](#footnote-612) In all its pulsating flesh and spraying blood glorification, we acknowledge that “what we see is not the animal, nor is it suffering, but the artifice and spectacle of human exceptionalism.”[[613]](#footnote-613) Therefore, as the vat-creatures express their aliveness and Gene’s screams echo throughout the lab-factory, we are encouraged to witness this performance differently. With an overinvestment in this pained performance, alongside discernible references to figures of the horror genre, Blackwell encourages us to partake in the ridiculousness of *real* meat and to find pleasure in the carniveracity that it promotes—in other words, we empty *real* meat of violent meaning. As Leather-face enacts the slasher-coded butchering scene, she provides an overinvestment in the surface level performance of Proper Meat’s *realness*, while also drawing on the material presence of actual animals. In deliberately carnal and euphemistic language Blackwell imbues Leather-face’s performance with an intimate pleasure. Through vegan camp, we laugh at *real* meat’s overinvestment in pleasure—at the euphemised flange, chute, screams, and meat—even as whirring blade meets pale skin. As such, like this expression of screaming suffering, *Beef* pushes pleasure to its camp excess. In this alternative witnessing, however, Quinn states that “vegan camp, by laughing in the face of horror, forces an acknowledgement of the complicity of vegans in systems of global exploitation.”[[614]](#footnote-614) Therefore, as we literally laugh in the face of horror—Ms Leather-face—we take part in this vicarious suffering, this performance of butchery, where we take our own saw to actual animals’ flesh. In *Beef*’s cultured flesh future, then, vegan reader and vegan character alike, are always complicit in suffering, even while they draw pleasure from “the artifice and spectacle of human exceptionalism.”[[615]](#footnote-615)

As news spreads of cultured flesh’s suffering, it sends traumatic shockwaves throughout Australia. Transmitted, once again, through violent archival renderings “the message was terrifying—if this footage was not fake, and this woman was not crazy, then vatmeat was alive and conscious. If this was true, then the world was a horrendous culture of ghouls—corpse-eaters every one of us.”[[616]](#footnote-616) With these compilated shots of oozing flesh and obfuscated actual animals made present, Gene and Royston have achieved what they set out to do: make a meatmovie advert for The Beef Corporation’s Proper Meat. As a thrilling, sinister, and freakish spectacle, this meat movie becomes a “massive viral smash. Absolutely perfect.”[[617]](#footnote-617) Through this viral meatmovie and as *Beef*’s characters begin to acknowledge their “horrendous culture of ghouls,” cultured flesh is, once again, caught up in these haunting exchanges with other fleshes. Just as actual animals expose their haunting presence in *real* meat, Proper Meat, too, now haunts its consumers, since, like Reginald, everyone has been partaking in animal flesh; they are all corpse-eaters. Implicit in “corpse-eaters” is a dual consumption, where there is an acknowledgment of both the consumption of cultured flesh’s actual animals and the way consuming this flesh “ate at my soul, Royston. The meat was eating me.” [[618]](#footnote-618) Faced with the complicity—of both reader and character—in the violent technologies of The Beef Corporation’s haunted lab-factories, Quinn suggests that vegan camp offers us “the ability to revel in the instability of human attachments to meat, in the paradoxical nature of the desire to consume and understand nonhuman animals, and to accept the impossibility of a pure or complete veganism.”[[619]](#footnote-619) Therefore, as *Beef*’s characters admit their “horrendous culture of ghouls” and their complicity as “corpse-eaters,” they undermine both the carniveracity implicit to cultured flesh’s performance as *real* meat and the impossibility of a vegan future that relies on and is enabled by the consumption of cultured flesh. As this freakish meatmovie captures, there really is no distinction between real meat and *real* meat, between actual animals and cultured flesh; it was all a “simulated generation of differences,”[[620]](#footnote-620) it was all indistinct.

## **A Happy Cow**

Recalling New China TV’s vertical farm video, we watch from behind as a man sits at the desk of the central control system, overseeing the conditions of the farm. Either side of these important numerical measures are two cartoon cows. They smile up at us in yellow dungarees, taking one jovial stride towards the centre of the console. In ‘A Series of Steaks,’ as Lily thumbs through the pages of Helena’s sketchbook, which is filled with randomised marbling patterns and intricately woven sinews, she, too, uncovers cartoon cows, a drawing that Helena “did way back at the beginning, when she was thinking of using a cute cow as the company logo. It’s derivative, it’s kitsch, the whole thing looks like a degraded copy of someone else’s ripoff drawing of a cow’s head.”[[621]](#footnote-621) Like the dungaree-clad cartoon cows of the vertical farm, this cute cartoon cow, featured alongside Helena’s practised marbling patterns, functions as a simulacrum, where, through her sketches, Helena practices the “orbital recurrence of models,”[[622]](#footnote-622) as “versions upon versions of happy cow faces grin straight up at Lily.”[[623]](#footnote-623) As simulacra, these happy cow faces mark themselves as *real* animals—they become the face of *real* meat. Helena and Lily decide to etch this *real* animal, this happy cow logo, into the vertebrae of each T-bone steak, after discovering that they are creating T-bones as a cover-up for Cai’s bovine parasitic cancer-infested, vertically farmed Hereford cows. As Helena and Lily etch happy cow logos into the T-bones, this artistry operates as both a cover-up *and* an uncovering, whereby the painted marbling of the T-bone covers-up the diseased and dying vertically farmed Hereford cows, while the sketched logo uncovers their presence. These sketches and paintings, then, highlight cultured flesh’s role in the continued farming and consumption of actual animals; the culturing of *real* meat enables the farming of real meat, precisely because actual animals are present within *real* meat. As such, actual animals are made present through a marking of *real* meat. This mark of the *real* animal calls attention to both cultured flesh’s performance as *real* meat and the material presence of the actual animals within it; in other words, the happy cow is the ultimate serve of cultured flesh’s “femme(nini)tease.”

As *real* animal marks *real* meat, to expose the actual animal within cultured flesh,we can turn to Baker’s comments on the marks made by actual animals in art, in reference to Olly and Suzi’s *Shark Bite*: “exhibited along with the ragged corner ripped off by the shark, spat out and subsequently recovered, [the piece of art] attests to the presence or existence of the living animal.”[[624]](#footnote-624) Like the ragged corner of the shark’s bite, Helena’s cartoon cow, which is presented inside the *real* meat of the T-bone steak, attests to the presence and the existence of the living animals—or, in this case, the once-living actual animals—of the vertically farmed Hereford cows. Illustrated in both hyperbolic kitsch art and visceral, bleeding materiality, this engraved piece of *real* meat exposes both the performative and indistinct material relationship between cultured flesh and actual animals. Baker comments further that

it could be said that it hardly matters what the painting looks like. The key thing is its status as the mark of the real, the wound, the touch: ‘by the end of the trip this paper’s been transformed from its clinical state into a document, it’s like a piece of parchment, a genuine artifact of the event.’[[625]](#footnote-625)

Following Baker, then, this rendering of happy cow logo onto cultured flesh steak forms a new, violent archival rendering, carrying, transferring, and exposing the traumatic legacy of flesh that lies within *real* meat. As *real* cow touches *real* meat, cultured flesh now explicitly bears the mark of the real, the wound of actual animals—which was previously obfuscated in cell lines—that will be served up for all of Cai’s guests to visually and gustatorily feast upon.

Alongside this sombre reading of the actual vertically farmed Hereford cows in *real* meat, Prasad, like Blackwell, also encourages us to revel in the amusement of *real* meat’s excessive performance and find pleasure in carniveracity’s façade, emptying the T-bone steaks of traumatic meaning. Through a vegan camp reading, we disrupt the T-bone’s identity as *real* meat, showcasing the excessive performativity of *realness* that is needed to serve *real* meat and, indeed, real meat. As Mr Chan, one of Helena’s regulars, extolls the quality of Cai’s vertically farmed cow flesh—““they’re serving steak at the banquet, straight from his farm! Now, don’t get me wrong, Helena, you’re talented at what you do—but a good old-fashioned slab of *real* meat, now, that’s the ticket!””[[626]](#footnote-626)—he exemplifies the absurd “overinvestment in its surface appearance”[[627]](#footnote-627) of both *real* meat and real meat. As cultured flesh extrapolates this overinvestment, drawing on the *realness* of its materiality and cultural experience, Mr Chan highlights that, even though Helena’s texturally, visually, and gustatorily “talented” steaks perform *realness*, the presence of violently butchered and traumatised actual animals—the actual Hereford cows of Cai’s vertical farm—are required for performing “the artifice and spectacle of human exceptionalism.”[[628]](#footnote-628) Therefore, through their happy cow etchings, Helena and Lily cultivate the performance of the “femme(nini)tease,” once again, calling attention to the “fakeness” of their *real* meat, the performance of their cultured flesh, through the application of the *real* animal logo onto animal flesh:

All known forgeries are failures, but sometimes that’s on purpose. Sometimes a forger decides to get revenge by planting obvious flaws in their work, then waiting for them to be revealed, making a fool of everyone who initially claimed the work was authentic. These flaws can take many forms—deliberate anachronisms, misspelled signatures, rude messages hidden beneath thick coats of paint—or a picture of a happy cow, surrounded by little hearts, etched into the T-bone of two hundred perfectly-printed steaks.[[629]](#footnote-629)

As Helena and Lily realise, the only way to expose the *real* is through the performative *realness* of the happy cow logo, by planting an obvious aesthetic flaw in their work, since, in all other ways, the cultured flesh T-bones are indistinct from their actual animal counterparts. The happy cow, then, like the deliberate anachronisms, draws humour from “an overinvestment in its surface appearance,”[[630]](#footnote-630) “making a fool of everyone” who practises and extolls carniveracity. This vegan camp reading, then encourages us to find pleasure in the performative *realness* of the T-bones, even as they hold the traumatic legacy of the actual Hereford cows within their flesh. Therefore, as happy cow logos are etched into lumbar vertebrae, they recall the jolly sailor scrimshaw of Quinn’s vegan camp reading, in both material artistry—the decoration of bone with whimsical designs—and critical interpretation. Quinn suggests that, when we view scrimshaw through vegan camp, it becomes

a way of refusing to experience horror or disgust at the canvas, of enjoying it for its surface performance of human exceptionalism, an enjoyment that parodies the object’s seeming earnestness and exposes the desperate drive to assert human dominance over the nonhuman animal to farce.[[631]](#footnote-631)

Therefore, as we experience the horror of the actual animals’ material presence in the T-bone’s marbled flesh and lumbar vertebrae canvas, like Quinn’s approach to scrimshaw, we can allow ourselves to find pleasure in cultured flesh’s surface performance as *real* meat. As artistically drawn marbling patterns are accompanied by sketches of cartoon cows, we laugh at how the happy cow’s garish and ridiculous presentation draws attention to the excessive performativity of *real* meat’s visual “meatiness,” while, now, also drawing enjoyment from the painted marbling patterns, Cai’s specifications of the T-bone steaks, Helena’s raggedly cut edges, and Lily’s copied human vertebral column as further iterations of this happy cow logo, of humans’ “desperate drive to assert human dominance,” and of an “overinvestment in its surface appearance.” [[632]](#footnote-632)

As we begin to draw pleasure and sustenance for the etched rendering of happy cow onto unhappy cow flesh, Quinn notes that

A camp enjoyment of scrimshaw thus detaches us from the earnestness with which we might otherwise want to approach the remains of a slaughtered mammal and raises key ethical questions. Principally, are we obliged to exclusively bear witness to violence and condemn exploitation, or might we also foster an aesthetic enjoyment that cultivates pleasure instead of intolerable pain? What might it mean to enjoy such scrimshaw by refusing to take it seriously, or at least not only seriously?[[633]](#footnote-633)

Like Quinn suggests, Prasad encourages us to both bear witness to the traumatic presence of actual animals within *real* meat, while also offering an alternative mode of witnessing that allows us to enjoy the self-referential frivolity of the happy cow logo. In both trauma and pleasure, we disrupt the carniveracity emboldened by cultured flesh, expose the indistinction between cultured flesh and actual animals, and allow ourselves to find “enjoyment derived from satirizing human exceptionalism,” while also acknowledging “our implication in its structures.”[[634]](#footnote-634) Therefore, as we engage in this vegan camp reading we laugh at the excessive performance of *real* meat that upholds carniveracity, while drawing “attention to an inescapable complicity in exploitation;”[[635]](#footnote-635) we become Helena and Lily, “the two women at the airport, laughing as they collect their luggage, disappearing into the crowd.”[[636]](#footnote-636)

As we read ‘A Series of Steaks’ and *Beef*’s extrapolated performances of suffering and excessive material displays through both the traumatic legacy of flesh and vegan camp’s aesthetic lens, we allow traumatic and pleasurable responses to exist simultaneously, offering new routes to critiques of carniveracity and expressions of cultured flesh and actual animals’ indistinction.

## **Corpse-Eating Guilt**

The speculative flesh ecologies of *Beef* and ‘A Series of Steaks’ highlight the indistinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh by using speculative literary strategies to expose the presence of the original in the simulacrum, of actual animals—in all their messy complexities of animal life—in cultured flesh, who are continuously obfuscated from *real* meat in slaughter, disease, genetic modification, and environmental degradation. As cultured flesh is harvested, grown, sawed, sliced, consumed, marketed, and performed in the novels, it challenges the carniveracity that bolsters and is bolstered by cultured flesh and exposes the performativity of *real* meat. Reading cultured flesh through Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra and the “delirious apotheosis of a productive technology,” troubles the ontological identity of cultured flesh as *real* meat, where it becomes both a simulacrum of animal flesh and a simulation of current iterations of cultured flesh in the texts. As such, although the *real* and the real are no longer discernible as simulacra, the texts’ speculative flesh ecologies facilitate the speculative conditions of ontological flux, which allow us to locate the actual animal in cultured flesh. When cultured flesh is considered through the approach of performativity—specifically as the “femme(nini)tease”—the texts demonstrate that *real* meat requires a performance that relies on the material presence of actual animals. Therefore, this performativity offers a route to the indistinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh, while allowing us to locate actual animals. Baudrillard’s “clone story” provides a foundation for identifying the haunting presence and traumatic legacy of flesh implicit in cultured flesh. The traumatic legacy of flesh becomes a further route to indistinction, via the simulacrum, demonstrating the eternal presence of actual animals in cultured flesh and the enduring edibility that haunts actual animals in the presence of cultured flesh. Finally, through vegan camp’s aesthetic lens, the texts demonstrate that trauma and pleasure appear simultaneously within cultured flesh, and they encourage us to embrace this uncomfortable co-existence. The texts’ vegan camp displays offer extrapolated suffering as a route to critiques of carniveracity and provide ethical positions that foster survival in complicity.

Adapting Baudrillard’s theorisation on suffering in the hyperreal war, [[637]](#footnote-637) we are reminded that “[the violence and trauma of *real* meat] is no less atrocious for being only a simulacrum—the flesh suffers just the same, and the [death and suffering of actual animals] are worth the same as in [real meat].”[[638]](#footnote-638) Highlighting, once again, the simulacra of animal flesh through cultured flesh, we acknowledge the haunting and traumatic indistinction of cultured flesh and actual animals that are vital—both essential and alive—for *real* meat’s performance. My analyses of *Beef* and ‘A Series of Steaks’ expose the indistinction of flesh and the performance of *real* meat, so that we are no longer encouraged to participate in Eat Just’s “Future of Meat,” refusing to see the dual estrangement and indistinction of actual animals in cultured flesh as a way to “respect animals.” Like *Beef*’s meatmovies, Eat Just’s videos become both a traumatic and pleasurable spectacle, where animal flesh is voraciously consumed, creating something sinister, thrilling, and downright freaky to feast our horrified eyes upon. Therefore, as we partake in Eat Just’s GOOD Meat, through virtual consumptions and violent archival renderings, we no longer proclaim “that is chicken, but it isn’t an animal;”[[639]](#footnote-639) instead, we acknowledge “that is chicken and it is an animal.” As Blackwell and Prasad remind us, when we consume cultured flesh, we are “corpse-eaters every one of us,”[[640]](#footnote-640) even as, through vegan camp’s aesthetic lens, we make “a fool of everyone who initially claimed the work was authentic.” [[641]](#footnote-641)

# Conclusion

## **Resurrected Meatballs**

On the 28th of March 2023, Forged by Vow unveiled the “Mammoth Meatball” in Amsterdam. With their mammoth meat as a “gigantic symbol of loss,” they aim to “resurrect conversations about meat and climate change.”[[642]](#footnote-642) This resurrected flesh was made using “the DNA sequence for mammoth myoglobin [. . .] [where they] filled in the few gaps using elephant DNA. This sequence was placed in myoblast stem cells from a sheep, which replicated to grow to the 20bn cells.”[[643]](#footnote-643) Using emerging technologies, mammoth, elephant, sheep, and technological thing flesh intertwine; their collective flesh brings about this resurrected meatball. With press photos of the meatball playing into the interaction between resurrection and speculation, they feature a nod to the Pleistocene era, through the raggedly cut rock plate, alongside the futuristic vapours of liquid nitrogen. A miniaturised knife and fork sit either side of the meatball, emphasizing its size, which plays into the mythic enormity of the mammoth in flesh and stature, as well as in cultural significance. Despite this carefully curated display, mammoth-hungry consumers might be disappointed to learn that you cannot actually consume this mammoth meatball, since

‘we haven’t seen this protein for thousands of years,’ said Wolvetang. ‘So we have no idea how our immune system would react when we eat it. But if we did it again, we could certainly do it in a way that would make it more palatable to regulatory bodies.’[[644]](#footnote-644)

The mammoth meatball’s creators acknowledge that the speculatively resurrected mammoth flesh could have actual consequences for human flesh, while ensuring that they keep the possibility of consumable mammoth on the table. As they “resurrect conversations about meat and climate change,” [[645]](#footnote-645) “open up new conversations about cultivated meat’s extraordinary potential,”[[646]](#footnote-646) and “start a conversation about how we eat, and what the future alternatives can look and taste like,”[[647]](#footnote-647) they operationalise future conversations and speculative imaginings to promote the cultural, technological, and financial importance of their resurrected mammoth meatballs.

They note on their website that “history is defined by the bold—the people with big dreams and endless determination.”[[648]](#footnote-648) Already, their mammoth meatballs become part of a history based on the trajectory of a speculative future. Forged by Vow’s “Mammoth Meatball” project, therefore, which turns “imagination into reality with cultured meat,”[[649]](#footnote-649) is itself a form of speculative flesh ecology. However, this speculative flesh ecology remains firmly rooted in speculative capitalist value, whereby Forged are focused on “pushing the boundaries of technology to bring cutting-edge products to market.”[[650]](#footnote-650) In other words, they make present financial investments for speculative monetary rewards. The rubric of speculative flesh ecologies, as explored in the thesis, sheds new light on the dubious innovation of the “Mammoth Meatball” project, since it explains and exposes the conceptual and material terrain on which the commoditisation of life is formed. Exemplified in the mammoth meatball’s speculative flesh ecology these terrains include: distinction, instrumentalization, cultural status, spectacle, and consumption. By analysing the work of key twenty-first century speculative fictions, in this thesis, I have shown how their different speculative flesh ecologies draw out modes of ethical resistance in the texts that can help us respond ethically to the fleshes of the mammoth meatball, including: communities of universal consideration and speculative veganism, mutualism and ethical consumption, affective relationships and multi-flesh communication, and traumatic utterances and performance. Each form of resistance proceeds towards building indistinct communities and generating alternative approaches to indistinct ways of living. Therefore, the concept of the speculative flesh ecologies is important for exposing and making open to critical reconfiguration the terrain on which key battles about the future of ethical considerations of life play out.

In chapter one, my analysis of the speculative flesh ecologies of *The Road* and *Meat* provided communities of universal consideration and speculative veganism as forms of ethical resistance. Proceeding from a point of indistinction, these ethical resistances challenged the ideological distinctions between humans and animals. The fictions’ indistinct communities and ways of living are based on the acknowledgement and acceptance of a shared edibility and fleshiness between humans and animals. Chapter two’s focus on the speculative flesh ecology of *Semiosis* considered mutualism and ethical consumption as ethical resistance. *Semiosis*’ human-plant relationships fostered ways to acknowledge our shared edibility, while being aware of the different degrees of vulnerability and exposure between plant flesh and human flesh. In doing so, *Semiosis* explored ethical modes of consumption that afforded both plant and human flesh other potentialities outside of simply being food for one another. As I explored the speculative flesh ecologies of *Pigs* and *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, affective relationships and multi-flesh communication emerged as forms of ethical resistance in the novels. The fictions demonstrated the ethical potential of opening ourselves up to the affective power of flesh, teaching us new ways to play, conjoin, and respond to flesh. Both *Pigs* and *The Man with the Compound Eyes* also captured how, even in moments of dying, death, consumption, and instrumentalization, recalcitrance can generate new routes to ethical consideration. Finally, in the speculative flesh ecologies of *Beef* and ‘A Series of Steaks,’ my analysis explored traumatic utterances and performance as modes of ethical resistance. The texts’ explorations of cultured flesh’s creation, marketing, and solutions offered performance and trauma as tools for challenging the carniveracity tied to flesh consumption. In doing so, the texts acknowledged the traumatic and performative indistinction between cultured flesh and animal flesh as routes towards resistance and survival.

Therefore, as we return to Forged by Vow’s “Mammoth Meatball” project through the rubric of speculative flesh ecologies, we begin to see how forms of ethical resistance appear. As the meatball sits atop an anciently-coded plate as both a “gigantic symbol of loss” and the historical food of the future that you cannot yet consume, we can find ethical resistance by exposing its performance of resurrection, innovation, and carniveracity. When we expose this performance, we also seek out the traumatic utterances of the mammoths, elephants, and sheep that reside within this resurrected meatball—animals are not absented from this flesh, and their presence generates resistance. As chemicals and the archival DNA of the mammoth’s flesh threaten to perniciously transform human flesh, we expose that, even in death and consumption, the mammoth meatball can generate ethical consideration, through both thing flesh and recalcitrance. As such, we enact a form of ethical resistance by opening human flesh up to the affective power of thing flesh. As the mammoth meatball “start[s] a conversation about how we eat,”[[651]](#footnote-651) we find ethical resistance in refocusing this speculative conversation of *how* to eat towards forms of ethical consumption that afford the mammoth flesh other potentialities outside of their identity as resurrected food. Finally, as Forged by Vow toy with the “increasing crossover between the technologies used in medical and human stem cell research and the production of cultured meats,”[[652]](#footnote-652) alongside the “potential of more than 50 species, including alpaca, buffalo, crocodile, kangaroo, peacocks and different types of fish”[[653]](#footnote-653) to be used in their future cultured flesh, they invite speculations about the potential consumption of human flesh. With the potential for human meatballs on the menu, we seek out ethical resistance through our acknowledgment of shared edibility and the potential to be more-than-meat. In doing so, we encourage alternative community building and relationships that proceed from indistinction, where expansive universalism and speculative veganism become forms of ethical resistance in practice. Therefore, through these forms of ethical resistance, fostered by the indistinction of flesh in the speculative flesh ecologies, we can apply Forged by Vow’s claims differently: “food as we know it doesn’t need to stay the way we know it. [. . .] We can do better.”[[654]](#footnote-654)

By exploring speculative flesh ecologies in twenty-first century speculative fiction, then, my thesis highlights how the indistinction of flesh spans across seemingly disparate ontologies and encourages us to expand the ethical possibilities for these fleshy others. As explored through both the four main philosophers—Calarco, Marder, Bennett, and Baudrillard—and the speculative fictions themselves, speculative flesh ecologies foster different routes to indistinction and generate multiple forms of ethical resistance. From violent exposure to affective vulnerability, indistinction is continuously achieved and reassessed, practiced and examined, full of possibility and risk, in accordance with Calarco’s assertion that “indistinction means that we have ethical and ontological work to do.”[[655]](#footnote-655) The fictions’ speculative flesh ecologies pursue the ethical and ontological work of indistinction, encouraging us to be receptive to the ontological ambiguity of flesh and proceed towards forms of ethical possibilities and resistance through indistinction.

## **The Future of Speculative Flesh Ecologies**

My methodology and the concept of “speculative flesh ecologies” as a critical rubric could be applied to other strands of literature that share an interest in different kinds of ecologies, fleshy or non-fleshy, and speculative or non-speculative.

I suggest speculative flesh ecologies *of contemporary East Asia* as one such opportunity for exploration. This project would analyse works of translated twenty-first century literature from East Asia, focusing on representations of flesh within geo-political and cultural contexts. It would build on the work of this thesis and the East Asian literature already discussed. Shifting focus from the ontological dimension of flesh in speculative flesh ecologies to incorporate a geo-political and cultural analysis would speak to the specific anxieties and imaginaries discussed by East Asian writers around flesh, consumption, and cultural status. As cultural anxieties and pressures surrounding marriage, family structures, and birth rates rise, in East Asia, these twenty-first century East Asian texts are ripe for exploration, grappling with materiality and consumerism, ceremony and tradition, and embodiment and decay, specifically in relation to gendered flesh.

These marital and procreational pressures are not experienced equally between men and women, since, as Tianhan Gui notes, “women’s identity in East Asian cultures still must be realized through marriage and childbearing;” therefore, “single women face more discrimination than single men.”[[656]](#footnote-656) According to Gui, “expanded educational and professional opportunities [mean] marriage has become a less attractive option for many women in East Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea.”[[657]](#footnote-657) Therefore, many East Asian countries have cited that “the rising proportion of *women* who are not married is contributing substantially to the trend to ultra-low fertility observed in many of these countries [my emphasis],” as well as threatening the traditions of marriage and family, which they see as “the bedrock for a strong society.”[[658]](#footnote-658) With women’s identities and bodies exposed and vulnerable to traditional expectations, these cultural shifts, societal anxieties, and gendered pressures, can be tracked and traced in an emerging body of twenty-first century East Asian speculative fiction that demonstrates an interest in the ontological haziness and abject consumptions and creations of flesh.

As Bora Chung’s short story, ‘The Head,’ from her collection, *Cursed Bunny* (2017), explores a toilet-dwelling waste creature that claims its creator as its mother, before stealing her identity and flushing her down the toilet as waste, the text explores the affective power of thing flesh, the contemporary issues of waste and consumerism, and the cultural anxieties surrounding women’s identities and participation in familial structures. In ‘The Head,’ a woman gives birth to her faeces-formed, toilet-dwelling replacement, who flushes her autonomy down the toilet without her consent. As such, ‘The Head’ finds commonality with the thing flesh and affective relationships traced in my analysis of Wu’s *The Man with the Compound Eyes*, while developing a critical perspective on gendered cultural expectations and anxieties through flesh. Sayaka Murata’s *Life Ceremony* (2022) explores the relationship between flesh, consumption, and cultural expectations. As the characters partake in moments of transgressive and erotic flesh consumption, including cannibalised wakes in ‘Life Ceremony’ and reproductive entanglements in ‘A Clean Marriage,’ they partake in speculative ceremonies that challenge present traditions. Both short stories explore the feeling of detachment from one’s own flesh, when their characters both resist and partake in carnality and carnivory. *The Last Children of Tokyo* (2014) by Yoko Tawada depicts a generation of children whose flesh has been transformed, becoming more fragile and vulnerable, while equally more transcendent and otherworldly, in Tokyo’s speculative future. As their flesh transforms, the elders watch as the children decay, while their flesh continues to live on. *The Last Children of Tokyo*, then, feeds the cultural anxiety of an ageing and declining population, while simultaneously redefining what it means to be a family and what it means to be (non)human. Therefore, the novel shares in the metamorphosis, slippery materiality, and affective decay of Natsumi Tanaka’s short story, ‘A Life with Cibi,’ that began this thesis, while speaking to cultural anxieties surrounding age and population. Therefore, analyses of these East Asian speculative fictions, using the rubric of speculative flesh ecologies, would consider the constant flux of flesh’s ontological identities, alongside gendered cultural contexts and philosophical and theoretical approaches of East Asia.

Another opportunity for exploration would be *queer* speculative flesh ecologies. Queer speculative flesh ecologies would engage with shifting understandings of gender and sexuality in relation to flesh in twenty-first century speculative fictions, encouraging us to be open to the fluid identities of gender, sexuality, relationships, and species. Analysing speculative fictions that proceed from a point of fleshy queerness would, like the speculative flesh ecologies, encourage us to challenge the rigid binaries and ideologies surrounding gender and sexuality and create alternative communities and relationships founded on an ethics of queer flesh. Like my thesis, explorations of queer speculative flesh ecologies in speculative fictions would be framed alongside twenty-first century examples of queer struggles and progress and analysed with philosophers whose work engages with queerness and flesh. Alongside the performance of gender in relation to the performance of *real* meat that I discussed in *Beef* and ‘A Series of Steaks’ in chapter four, other moments of fleshy indistinction in the thesis’ speculative fictions can be queered and analysed differently, through the concept of queer speculative flesh ecologies. For example, in *Semiosis*, we can queer the gender identity of Stevland (the rainbow bamboo), through moments of flesh consumption and indistinction. When plants assume a gender and perform it—in name, pronouns, and mannerisms—like Stevland does, they trouble and challenge the rigidity and clean-cut distinctions of gender, encouraging us to be open to multiple expressions of gender identity that do not conform to cultural binaries. Therefore, as humans gorge themselves on Stevland’s fruits and his tentacular roots feed on flesh and fertilise bodies, these fleshy consumptions and plant flesh ontologies challenge approaches of gender essentialism; instead, we are encouraged to take a fluid, generous, and expansive approach to gender identities, in much the same way that we do with flesh.

Reflecting on the indistinct ontological and ethical outcomes of this thesis’ analysis of speculative flesh ecologies in twenty-first century speculative fiction, I have demonstrated that when we proceed from a position of indistinction, leaving the boundaries of ethical consideration wide open, we advocate for flesh to “become something more, something beyond the “mere” meat to which the dominant culture tries to reduce them”[[659]](#footnote-659) and for us to “respect to the other potentialities”[[660]](#footnote-660) of flesh. Therefore, as speculative flesh ecologies move into the future—ever closer, continuously relevant, and ripe for further exploration—they equip us with modes of ethical resistance that encourage us to take indistinct, expansive approaches to the fleshy beings who participate in this shared ecology.

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