

12 Vegetable Violence

The Agency, Personhood, and Rhetorical Role of Vegetables in Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton's *The 52-Storey Treehouse*

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With their bestselling illustrated book series about a multi-storied treehouse, Australians Andy Griffiths (author) and Terry Denton (illustrator) have reached an international audience. The books have been criticized for their use of subversive and scatological humour, their irreverence for authority figures, and their perceived encouragement of young readers toward bad behaviour (as summarized in Hatley, 2016). This article focuses on the fourth book in the series of (currently) nine books, *The 52-Storey Treehouse*, which features multiple episodes of violence by and against vegetables and has a plot line that sends the series' protagonists travelling to the Vegetable Kingdom. With reference to the field of critical plant studies (Hall, 2011; 2019; Manusco & Viola, 2016; Marder, 2013; Nealon, 2016; and Ryan, 2016; 2018), and drawing on Kerry Mallan's (1993) discussion of humour in children's literature, this article analyses the attribution of personhood and agency to vegetables in the story, examining their rhetorical role in Griffiths and Denton's book, with an emphasis on acts of vegetable violence. The analysis demonstrates that *The 52-Storey Treehouse*, through the attribution of personhood to vegetables, leads the reader on a multifaceted exploration of their moral standing.

While quite a few studies discuss the role of food in children's literature (see for instance Keeling & Pollard, 2009;¹Carrington & Harding, 2014), few contributions yet involve other-than-human perspectives on human relationships to food. There also seems to be little done on the representation of vegetables,² which is interesting, given that the dinner battle over vegetables is well known to most parents. While a discussion of plant agency and personhood in *The 52-Storey Treehouse* in relation to tropes of food in children's literature is outside the scope of this chapter, its analysis founded in critical plant studies may introduce new kinds of "eat-your-vegetables" dinner table discussions, as foreshadowed by the treatment of vegetables in Griffiths and Denton's narrative.

Critical Plant Studies, Plant Agency, and the Concept of Vegetable Violence

In the fourth book in the wildly popular Treehouse series, *The 52-Storey Treehouse*, the series' protagonists Andy and Terry go in search for a prince

to awaken their sleeping neighbour, Jill. Attempting to outsmart an ugly potato prince in the Vegetable Kingdom, they soon find themselves trapped by vengeful vegetables. Casting plants in the role of villains, the story undermines the positioning of plants as helpless victims, pointing to their considerable resources and their independent agendas. The protagonists' rescue comes in the form of the violent Vegetable Patty, who turns out to hate vegetables even more than Andy and Terry do. In fact, Patty enacts such a wide register of vegetable violence that the series' protagonists begin to sympathize with the cultivated produce. Are Griffiths and Denton standing up for plants, or are they, on the contrary, making fun of ideas proposed by the rapidly expanding field of critical plant studies?

While there have long been voices proposing that plants are sentient and possess "some degree of voluntary powers" (Darwin, E., 1796), expressed not least through root systems functioning akin to a brain (Darwin, C., 1880), such suggestions have not, so far, gained traction with the scientific mainstream. Recently, however, biological research has emerged to (re)demonstrate the variety and complexity of the adaptive behaviour of plants, leading to claims of plant intelligence (Manusco & Viola, 2016; Pollan, 2013; Trewavas, 2003) as well as to a more pervasive botanical and philosophical questioning of the predominant Western cultural attitude towards, and representation of, plants.

This upsurge of interest in plants is understandable as the cumulative effects of ecocriticism (see for instance Carson, 1962; Næss, 1989; Buell, 1995; 2005, and Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996), animal activism (Singer, 1975; Derrida, 2002; Haraway, 2008), and critical and feminist posthumanism (Haraway, 1991; Hayles, 1999; Wolfe, 2010; Braidotti, 2013), which have gained momentum as persistent critiques of the modern capitalist exploitation of both the environment and other species. The research into plants and their capacities has gained additional urgency in the context of the global climate change crises, since "plants dominate every terrestrial environment, composing ninety-nine percent of the biomass on Earth" (Manusco and Viola, 2016, p. xii) and thus are vital to the global climate. Can plants save us from the consequences of our environmental follies? Their biosphere dominance at least suggests a natural resilience that seems hopeful in this age of accelerated species loss.

Biosphere plant predominance notwithstanding, are we free to behave towards plants in the manner that best suits our needs? If animals are now being included in the moral spectrum, following the battle by animal activists, plants seem the next logical extension of a species-inclusive posthumanist sensibility—a point also made by Michael Marder in the introduction to *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013, p. 2) and suggested by Donna Haraway's call for the making of kin across species (2016). The position is not uncontroversial, however. Discussing the pervasive sidestepping of the question of plant life in Western philosophy, and with reference to Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, Jeffrey T. Nealon notes that:

... animal studies' blanket refusal to consider vegetable life within its biopolitical frame seems to function as a subset of an old practice: trying to close the barn door of ethical consideration right after your chosen group has gotten out of the cold of historical neglect.

(Nealon, 2016, p. xii)

The conflict of plant versus animal rights is thematized in *The 52-Storey Treehouse* through the plot line that sees Andy and Terry's animal loving neighbour Jill, who lives with a menagerie of cats, rabbits, dogs, horses, a goat, and a cow, put to sleep as she pricks herself on a pointed carrot, Sleeping Beauty-style. Her prolonged slumber is eventually discovered by Andy and Terry, as they, dressed in pith helmets, hack their way into her overgrown house with a set of machetes. While their attire is a visual nod to jungle and colonist narratives, they are also inflicting damage on plant life. Later, when the three of them find themselves trapped and imprisoned in the Vegetable Kingdom, and stand accused of several acts of hatred towards and violence against vegetables, Jill pleads to be freed since she would "never dream of hurting" vegetables (p. 220). From earlier books in the series, the reader knows that Jill can talk to all kinds of animals and insects, such as sharks and ants—a purpose for which she is sometimes summoned to the treehouse by Andy and Terry. However, it now becomes clear that her kindness does not extend to vegetables, so her plea to be released falls on deaf ears: "No Way! ... You feed truckloads of poor defenseless vegetables to your animals every day. That's why we sent that cursed carrot to your house to put you to sleep" (p. 220).

The story line of course contradicts the claim that the vegetables are "defenseless" by revealing that their agency extends well beyond their own Kingdom. The vegetables' ingenuity in carrying out their scheme paints them as possessors of plant intelligence, and their vengeful behaviour contradicts a culturally predominant view of plants as passive, silent and pleasing (Ryan, 2018, p. 1). Still, the vegetables' accusation towards the otherwise considerate Jill calls to mind the complaints of maltreatment on the part of the Old Forest in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) and echoes Marder's argument that plants have been subject to ethical neglect and exploitation:

In the absence of the will to think through the logic of vegetal life, beyond its bio-chemical, cellular or micro-molecular processes and ecological patterns, philosophers readily assumed that within the broad evolutionary frame of reference, the existence of plants is less developed or less differentiated than that of their animal and human counterparts and that therefore vegetal beings are unconditionally available for unlimited use and exploitation. Such repression of the most basic question regarding plants became the breeding ground for their ethical neglect ...

(Marder, 2013, pp. 2–3)

Throughout the Treehouse series, Jill is depicted as ethically considerate towards animal life. She too, however, in caring for her animal friends, has failed to consider the moral standing of plants and this shortcoming is, humorously but somewhat edgily, thematized in *The 52-Storey Treehouse*.

Certain aspects of plant representation in the Treehouse series suggest traces of plant blindness (Wandersee & Schussler, 1999; Wandersee & Clary, 2006; White, 2019). While Western literature has been more attentive to the plant world than Western science and philosophy, it still tends to conform to a general anthropocentric paradigm, as literary discourse predominantly makes symbolic or figurative use of plants to represent human and animal meaning, treating the landscape as the backdrop for human or animal dramas (Gagliano et al., 2017, pp. x–xi) and this form of back-grounding is the fate of the tree sustaining Andy and Terry’s sprawling treehouse. The series’ titles, as well as the early presentation of the treehouse tree at the start of each book in the series, right after the habitual presentation of Andy and Terry, seem to suggest that the tree is nearly as central to the story as its protagonists. However, it is the treehouse as a human construction, rather than the tree itself that receives the protagonists’, and therefore the readers’ attention: “Well, when I say ‘tree’, I mean treehouse” (p. 4).

The front endpapers of each book in the series show a cross-section of the crown of the tree, to display the increasingly extravagant contents of the treehouse, resulting from Andy’s and Terry’s constant expansions. With reference to John Charles Ryan’s distinction between the *extrinsic* (forces exerted on plants) and *intrinsic* (attributes generated by plants themselves) capacities of plants (2016, p. 41), the treehouse remains acted upon by Andy and Terry throughout the series, while they depend, without acknowledging this fact, upon the intrinsic ability of trees to grow upward and expand. The overall role of the tree in the series is thus to serve as “the backdrop for human or animal dramas”, consonant with the anthropocentric perspective common to Western literature and culture.

Although trees have been singled out by many cultures as worthy of particular attention, as testified by the symbolic significance they have in many religious traditions (Guanio-Uluru, 2015; Guanio-Uluru, 2018), the tree is but a silent background figure in the Treehouse series. Zoe Jaques notes that trees can “be said to have the most symbiotic of relationships with humans, and they also generate as much affection as pets, thereby deconstructing a humanistic hierarchy of being which traditionally places fauna above flora” (2015, p. 113). Drawing on Maud Hines (2004), Jaques further argues that the literary device of giving trees a voice “grants them subject status”, thus making them worthy of protection (p. 113). The treatment of both the treehouse tree and the vegetables in *The 52-Storey Treehouse* runs counter to these maxims, however, since the tree has no voice or subject status in the story and the vegetables, which do appear as vocal “subjects”, meet with a violent end.

Unlike the silent tree, the vegetables portrayed in prose and imagery in *The 52-Storey Treehouse* are neither innocent nor defenceless and vegetable violence, as the concept is explored here, is thus a two-way street: it is the violence performed both by and against vegetables in the story. While pitting the vegetables in the narrative as agential beings, *The 52-Storey Treehouse* acknowledges, not least through the character of Vegetable Patty, that vegetables usually are acted upon by humans, and frequently so in a violent way. However, as Vegetable Patty fights to eradicate vegetables from the face of the earth (p. 248), the vegetables in *The 52-Storey Treehouse* fight back, exerting their forces on the story's protagonists.

Vegetables as Persons: Giving Plants a Voice—and a Face

Within the field of critical plant studies, there is ongoing discussion concerning whether the moral standing of plants can be legitimized by thinking of plants as persons, an argument furthered by Matthew Hall (2011), who has examined attitudes to plants in Eastern, Western, Indigenous and Pagan systems of thought, and holds that plants are other-than-human persons that should be recognized as relational, intelligent beings worthy of our respect. Countering Hall, Marder has proposed that the attribution of personhood to plants is a form of metaphysical violence, “forcing plants into the mold of appropriative subjectivity” (2013, p. 55) by imposing human philosophical categories upon them. Hall has refuted Marder’s criticism by highlighting that his discussion of plant personhood has an animist orientation, rather than a Western philosophical basis, and that it is inspired by indigenous cultures that do not equate “person” with “human” but bases the notion of personhood on kinship relationships (2019). While Western philosophical notions of personhood have centred on the attribution of certain mental capacities, privileging reason and self-consciousness, Hall discusses by example several animist traditions where “The category of person applies to anything that has being, and who is capable of relating” (Detwiler, 1992, p. 239, quoted in Hall, 2019, p. 5), emphasizing that “a person is one who is in a kinship relationship, not necessarily based on genealogy, mythology or biology, but through the *situated act* of sharing and relating” (Hall, 2019, p. 5, my emphasis). These distinctive positions in regard to plant personhood help clarify the ideological underpinnings of the episodes of vegetable violence in *The 52-Storey Treehouse*.

Along with much children’s literature, *The 52-Storey Treehouse* resorts to a degree of anthropomorphism as a storytelling strategy in the villainization of, and call for empathy with, vegetables. Anthropomorphism is here understood as “the interpretation of nonhuman things or events in terms of human characteristics” (Guthrie, 2008). Since *The 52-Storey Treehouse* is a visual children’s novel (Tønnesen, 2018, p. 181), characterized by presenting a single, longer, unified narrative published in a book-format, where script, images and design “are so closely knit together that they only make sense

when read as a visual unity” (Tønnesen, 2018, p. 173, my translation), this anthropomorphism is developed both visually and verbally. The analysis of the narrative’s position(s) on plant personhood and vegetable violence thus requires a detour explaining certain characteristics of visual children’s novels, including a brief discussion of the story’s humorous tone.

Jeff Kinny’s series *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and Liz Pichon’s *Tom Gates* series are well-known examples of visual children’s novels. Kai Mikkonen further cites Kinny’s series as an example of a hybrid form of the comic, describing the series as “books illustrated with comics and cartoons” (2017, p. 13), a characteristic that applies equally well to the *Treehouse* series. Most of the illustrations in *The 52-Storey Treehouse* anchor and expand on the narrative presented in the verbal text. At intervals, however, the visuals are whole page spreads, carrying the main weight of the storytelling. Such page spreads invite what Mikkonen terms a global reading, that is, a nonlinear way of reading, as opposed to the sequential reading that is common in comics (2017, p. 36). The sequential sections in *The 52-Storey Treehouse* include the excerpts from Vegetable Patty’s book *Fun with Vegetables* (pp. 85–103), Andy’s and Terry’s journey through the Vegetable Kingdom (pp. 172–181), and the section that shows Patty demolishing vegetables within the Vegetable Kingdom (pp. 234–239). Consequently, the parts of the book that most explicitly deal with violence by and towards vegetables are presented in cartoon panelling, inviting a sequential reading, with an emphasis on movement, action, and repetition.

The reading of comics involves attending to the relationship between panels and to the juxtapositions and transitions between these. The analysis of verbal–visual relationships involves inferences about changes in viewpoint through careful attention to visual cues, such as facial features, gestures, and other details (Mikkonen, 2017, p. 40). In this reading, the vegetables’ facial expressions and their body language are of particular importance to the interpretation of the narrative’s overall rhetoric concerning the narrated acts of vegetable violence in *The 52-Storey Treehouse*. Thus, when discussing the illustrations, this analysis emphasizes the focalized (Bal, 2006), in accordance with Mikkonen’s argument that in graphic storytelling, “the image necessarily reveals a spatial point from which something (the focalized) is perceived” (Mikkonen, 2017, p. 74), so that the focalized matters more to the narrative cohesion than the focalizer. In hybrid comic forms such as *The 52-Storey Treehouse*, Hallberg’s concept of iconotext (1982), that is, the conception of text and image as a unity of meaning, complements the vocabulary of comic narrative theory as developed by Mikkonen.

In *The 52-Storey Treehouse*, the theme of vegetable violence is first introduced in an illustration of four small animals that are busy loading a carrot gun. A tiny caption reads: “spare carrots” (p. 7), with an arrow indicating a stack of carrots nearby. The violence soon develops to include the human species, when a couple of pages later, Andy and Terry are displayed juggling chainsaws. Two speech bubbles establish a level of intra-diegetic commentary

as the visual character Andy screams “Terry! I just chopped off my nose!” The visual character Terry replies, in another speech bubble: “I can’t hear you, Andy. I just chopped off my ears!” (p. 9). Such episodes establish casual violence, characteristic of slapstick comedy, as an integral part of the story world. According to Kerry Mallan, such slapstick or banana-skin humour “provides the basic ingredient of much humorous literature for children” (1993, p. 34). For smaller children, the illustrated format is of importance as their appreciation of this type of humour “is often triggered by the visual realisation of what’s happening; the pictures are the stimulus for their laughter” (Mallan, 1993, p. 34). Mallan adds that older children probably handle such depictions better, since they are able to distinguish between reality and fantasy and thus can appreciate parody and gross exaggeration (1993, p. 7), such as the violent absurdities depicted in the scene just discussed. The vegetable violence within the story consequently occurs within a context where cartoon violence is the norm rather than the exception and where the illustrations often provide the exaggeration that turns the verbal narration into slapstick comedy. In the cited instance where carrots are used as ballistic projectiles, the carrots are not attributed agency, nor do they display any anthropomorphizing characteristics.

The first sign of vegetable personhood in the book coincides with the reader’s first encounter with the narrative’s most aggressive perpetrator of vegetable violence. This incident occurs when Andy and Terry visit the office of their publisher, Mr Big Nose, to discover why he has not called as per usual to remind them of the imminent deadline for their manuscript.³ The illustrations show his office to be uncharacteristically untidy and among scattered objects and quite a few leaves on the floor they discover the book *Fun with Vegetables*, by Vegetable Patty. Its front cover depicts an angry woman, dressed in armour and brandishing savage-looking medieval weapons. Three, open-mouthed, scared-looking carrots “run” with beads of sweat around their “heads” in flight from the vengeful, sneering Patty (p. 86). The reader gets to read the start of the book along with Andy and Terry and the book-within-the-book consequently hands narration over to Patty: “Hi, Vegetable Patty here. As we all know, vegetable fighting is a serious business, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be fun. Don’t believe me? Well, read my book!” (p. 87). The change of narrator from Andy to Patty suggests that the anthropomorphized vegetables are focalized through Patty and may be attributed to her personal views. However, when Andy and Terry later enter the Vegetable Kingdom, they too encounter personified vegetables “in the flesh”. All the same, the rhetorical choice of inventing a special character responsible for gross acts of vegetable violence indicates a distancing mechanism by which Andy and Terry need not be complicit in such acts.

The excerpts from Patty’s book cover 17 pages and display Patty as she demolishes vegetables in multiple ways. This part of *The 52-Storey Treehouse* is framed in cartoon gutters. The verbal narration is a brief but rhythmically satisfying series of “war-calls” that rhyme:

“Boil them! Broil them! Salt and oil them! Crunch them! Munch them! Knock-out punch them! Grab them! Stab them! Shish kebab them! Throw them! Mow them! Tae-kwon-do them! Kick them! Flick them! Pogo stick them! Mash them! Smash them! Whip and lash them! Whack them! Smack them! Sap lock sac them! Crush them! Mush them! Drown and flush them!”

(pp. 88–103)

Each set of three imperatives cover a doublespread, with evocative illustrations of vegetables being acted upon in the specified way by Patty, who effectively reduces the anthropomorphized vegetables to vegetable patties (suggesting perhaps, that Patty engages not just in physical violence but also in a “metaphysical violence” as defined by Marder (2013, p. 55), by making the vegetables more appellatively like herself).

Only 5 of the 24 accompanying illustrations display the vegetables with no sign of personalization. In most of the cartoon drawings, the vegetables are depicted with anguished and frightened facial expressions, thus invoking sympathy, at least in a sensitive reader. Terry embodies this reading position: “‘That’s enough, Andy,’ says Terry, ‘I can’t take any more. It’s too violent! I never thought I’d say this, but I actually feel sorry for those poor vegetables ...’” (p. 104). The illustration shows Terry covering his eyes with his hands. Even Andy agrees: “‘Me too,’ I say. ‘It’s kind of weird to feel sorry for something you hate so much’” (p. 105).

It is the attribution of personhood on the part of the vegetables, visible in their anguished faces, that form the basis for this sympathy. This suggests that the personhood attributed to the vegetables is founded on a recognition of their cognitive capacities, in this case the ability to feel fear and pain—a position compatible with Western philosophical notions of personhood. The sympathy develops in response to a literary representation of vegetable pain and thus becomes a metacommentary to the treatment of vegetables in *The 52-Storey Treehouse*. Hall emphasizes “situated acts of sharing and relating” (2019, p. 6) as constitutive of (cross-species) kinship, and Andy’s and Terry’s responses to the (representation of) suffering vegetables indicate the beginnings of a relationship to vegetables that is becoming sensitized to their potential personhood.

The protagonists’ reactions to Patty’s vegetable brutalities appear as an unusual squeamishness to violence on their part. In her discussion of humour in children’s literature, Mallan finds that there are limits “to the nature and extent of the violence that will be tolerated, but situations which allow characters to emerge relatively unscathed are treated light-heartedly” (1993, p. 7). Such inability of violence to cause lasting harm is the norm in the rest of the narrative: While in the chainsaw episode Andy is depicted with a chopped off nose and Terry with a hole in his head where his ear has been, they bear no traces of the violence on the subsequent doublespread and it is consequently exposed within the fiction as an absurdity. From a

rhetorical perspective, the “Patty-cartoon” thus constitutes a break with the slapstick comedy that characterizes the rest of the book in two ways. Firstly, Patty’s violence against vegetables induces sympathy. Generally, Andy and Terry do not feel sorry for each other (or others) when they are subject to violence, such as in the incident when they chop off their own nose and ears. Secondly, the (same) vegetables do not reappear unharmed in the next spread. This indicates that Patty’s vegetable violence is of a different kind: it is *real* violence, in that its effects are both felt and lasting. The depicted violence is also more real in that, with a few creative exceptions, these are types of violence that vegetables undergo every day. Here, the vegetables are framed as victims—hence the need for the protagonists’ pity.

Walking a Mile in their Moccasins: Phytomorphism in the Vegetable Kingdom

The vegetables’ victimized position is overturned as Andy and Terry enter the Vegetable Kingdom, where the vegetables are revealed as powerful agents. In fact, they turn out to have kidnapped Mr Big Nose, further suggesting a power that infiltrates and impacts the human world (albeit at first glance in a manner more consistent with detective fiction than with botanically accurate plant agency). Andy and Terry, with Jill in tow in a glass coffin, make their entry into the Vegetable Kingdom on the trail of a (very hungry) caterpillar, a nod to Eric Carle’s 1969 classic. Walled in by a giant field of asparagus, the Vegetable Kingdom is closed off, like Jill’s overgrown house after she has fallen prey to the cursed carrot. The pattern repetition suggests that thick walls of plants are a common plant defence strategy. The asparagus, like the plants covering Jill’s house, is depicted without anthropomorphizing features. This changes as Andy and Terry break through the wall of asparagus to discover “a garden full of vegetables!” (p. 180). While there is nothing unusual in this verbal announcement, the illustration displays a more imaginative scene of smiling vegetables, engaged in the quintessentially British pursuits of picnicking, and playing tennis and croquet. The illustration thus confers both agency and personhood on the vegetables, anthropomorphizing them by showing them engaged in “civilized” human activities.

To blend in, the human protagonists decide to disguise as vegetables: Terry dons a broccoli costume, Andy takes on the form of a cob of corn and the sleeping Jill is dressed up as a carrot. Consequently, while the vegetables are anthropomorphized in the illustrations, the story’s main protagonists are “phytomorphized”, suggesting a two-way influence between the human and vegetable kingdoms. Through “species cross-dressing” the human protagonists take on the perspective of vegetables, even if the identification is only “skin deep”. While they change “skins”, they do not have to change their *behaviour* to fit in, since the vegetables already behave like humans. Arguably, this moves the relationship between humans and vegetables in the story closer to a sense of what Hall identifies as “we-ness”: “A focus on

interrelation rather than on difference [that is] an integral part of animist conceptions of personhood” (2019, p. 7).

Initially, the scheme is successful, as the Kingdom’s ugly potato prince soon wishes to marry carrot-Jill, who thus gets her Sleeping Beauty kiss and wakes up. However, when Jill pulls off her costume to prove she is not a vegetable, the scam is revealed. As a result, they are all seized by a “brutal battalion of brussel sprouts” (p. 192) and thrown in the dungeons, where they find Mr Big Nose, who has been kidnapped for publishing Patty’s *Fun with Vegetables*. In a sudden turn-around, the initially victimized vegetables are now cast in the role of aggressors, charging the human intruders with vegetable-impersonation (p. 194). Soon, they face “a mob of angry vegetables” (p. 215), and, in a role reversal, are placed into a pot to make human soup—a visual allusion to what Martine Hennard Dutheil calls the “explorer’s fear of ending up simmering in a giant cooking pot, an all-time favourite cliché of popular colonial fiction” (2001, pp. 105–106). By playing repeatedly on such colonialist clichés, the illustrations develop a parallel interpretive frame, casting Andy and Terry as colonizers and explorers of the Vegetable Kingdom, thus alluding to their ethically problematic position in relation to the vegetables.

From the perspective of critical plant studies, the display of vegetable aggression mirrors facets of actual plant behaviour. At least since the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Insectivorous Plants* (1875) it has been known that certain species of plants lure, trap and devour insects and that there are carnivorous plants that even trap and digest small animals (Manusco & Viola, 2016, p. 62). Several illustrations at this stage show the vegetables with toothful grins, aligning them with the trope of the monster plant, which, as T. S. Miller (2012) has suggested, plays on human taxonomic unease vis-à-vis plants. One of the leering plants is reading a book with the modified title: “fun with ~~vegetables~~ humans” (p. 215). The carnivalesque role reversal is further developed as the vegetables dance around the pot and sing: “We know just how you feel: You don’t want to be a meal! You don’t want your skin to peel! You don’t want to scream and squeal!” (p. 224). While this may be gloating, it also suggests vegetable sympathy with their human victims, reflecting Terry’s and Andy’s earlier sympathy with the vegetables molested by Patty. In light of the narrative progression, the chant “we know just how you feel” further strengthens the sense of “we-ness” between humans and vegetables and the whole sequence, with Andy and Terry dressing up as vegetables, the forceful agency of the vegetables themselves, and the role reversal in the soup scene, asks the reader to take on the perspective of vegetables—a perspectival change first suggested in the expressive illustrations in Patty’s book, where the vivid and agonized faces of the chopped vegetables cause Andy and Terry to pity them.

However, when all seems lost for the story’s protagonists, as the soup gradually heats, Vegetable Patty comes to their rescue, slicing, dicing, whipping, and plastic-wrapping the vegetables over three doublespreads,

freeing their human victims. Significantly, the representation of this final “victory” over the vegetables returns them to an inanimate, non-personal status: in these illustrations, none of the vegetables butchered by Patty are portrayed with eyes or faces, discouraging identification and sympathy with them on the reader’s part, even if earlier sequences, along with the vegetables’ song, invoke the brutal lot of vegetables more generally. Consequently, the narrative conclusion seems to back away from the implications of the vegetable sympathy that parts of the story seek to investigate.

Significantly, the character of Patty represents both the entry and exit point for the narrative’s reflection on plant agency and personhood. Her inordinate hatred of vegetables is explained with reference to a childhood incident where both her parents were accidentally squashed by a display of giant vegetables due to a freak storm—a situation where the wind, rather than the vegetables, is the active agent. Consequently, her vendetta towards vegetables is founded on a faulty logic. Patty’s appearance in the narrative ends with her emphatically urging the reader to “Eat your vegetables!”, in order to “wipe them from the face of the earth forever!” (p. 248). Her final message highlights the complexity of the book’s address to the reader: Is it undermining the parental admonition of eating vegetables (since it comes after a plot line that encourages children to sympathize and identify with them)—or is it undermining its own attempt to examine an expanded “we-ness” that also includes vegetables and other plants? In the rest of the narrative, as the protagonists return to their treehouse, there are no further signs of plant agency or vegetable personhood—such notions are all extinguished by Vegetable Patty.

Conclusion

The positioning of the treehouse tree as a silent backdrop for the action in the rest of the series and the elimination of the idea of plants as persons at the end of *The 52-Storey Treehouse* suggests that the exploration of plant personhood is an idea that is toyed with rather than an integrated view on the part of the implied authors. Conferring agency to vegetables, the narrative explores questions regarding plant agency, plant personhood, and the moral standing of plants, moving towards a conception of plant personhood that aligns with the sense of “we-ness” of indigenous animist views (Hall, 2019). This move is accomplished through anthropomorphizing the vegetables’ activities while phytomorphizing the story protagonists. However, the narrative eventually pulls back to a colonialist-like extinction of pluralism as Patty enters the Vegetable Kingdom, putting an end to the sentient life of its inhabitants. The colonial anxiety tied to the image of the soup pot thus comes to reflect unease on the part of the implied authors regarding the issue of plant agency and plant personhood. The vegetables are overall portrayed as a disruptive presence, putting the protagonists’ friend Jill to sleep, kidnapping their publisher, and subjecting them all to mortal danger

by threatening to devour them. Towards the end of the narrative, the animal lover Jill is rescued and restored while the vegetables are turned into patties and zip-lock bagged for human consumption. This frames the ideas of vegetable sentience, and of plants as other-than-human persons worthy of respect, as carnivalesque notions and as a temporary reversal of the status quo. While the protagonists return to their treehouse, relaxing among their assorted animal pets, plants are again relegated to the background of the story action. From the point of view of critical plant studies this ending is somewhat unsatisfactory since the exploration of plant sentience ultimately is sealed off and silenced.

While the book leads the reader through various moral positions in relation to vegetables, moving from pitiful sympathy (as co-readers of Patty's violent book) to reflections around the agency and personhood of plants and vegetables (within the Vegetable Kingdom) to an acceptance that plants may also be aggressors and "villains", the final silencing of the vegetables indicates a reluctance to accept the proposition that plants have moral worth. Even so, the vigorous agential vegetables making their guest appearance in *The 52-Storey Treehouse* manage to memorably disrupt the story universe, potentially sowing a few seeds of phyto-awareness in the reader along the way.

Notes

- 1 *Food in children's literature* makes not a single mention of vegetables. "Vegetarianism" occurs once, in relation to Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (p. 4).
- 2 *Feast or famine* has in total seven references to "vegetables", most of which are generic mentions of vegetables in conjunction with other foods. Only one of the references is relevant to this discussion: the mention of Berly Doherty's phyto-centric, metaphoric use of vegetables in poetry, as in "If you were a carrot and I was a sprout, I'd boil along with you, I'd sit on your plate" (in Pinset, 2014, p. 236).
- 3 The frame narrative in the Treehouse series usually centres on job procrastination, as each book details the crazy adventures undertaken by Andy and Terry in the process of writing the book that the reader is currently reading, while struggling to complete and hand in the manuscript before a tight deadline.

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