MONSTRUM 8.2 (December 2025) | ISSN 2561-5629

Seeding Vegetal Sovereignty: Plant-Based Witches and the Horrors of Gardening in *The Manor*

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The Manor is a plant-themed horror film directed by Axelle Carolyn and released in 2021. The film showcases the machinations of a coven of witches who prey on the elderly residents of the Golden Sun Manor Nursing Home. [1] These witches are self-described gardeners, nourishing themselves through their garden plot on the manor's property as well as through the life energy of their fellow patients via a hybrid humanoid-plant monster spawned from an oak tree living on the grounds. [2] Beneath the campy premise lies a vegan subtext wherein these "plant-based" witches sustain themselves through the life force of the plantified residents as well as from vegetation that in turn harvests nutrients from dead and dying animal bodies. [3] I will suggest that the horror of the film lies in both the exploitative modes of agriculture the witches employ and the category error they make when they flatten both human and nonhuman into plant food. This process involves the witches treating the nursing home as a nursery bed, instrumentalizing the plantification of the residents that occurs according to their natural aging processes. Since the witches harvest nutrients

[1] Witches invoke various associations that are topical for this film and the following discussion, from their capacity for ontological transformation and human-animal hybridity, their reliance on vegetation (in practices of witchcraft), and their association with the crone figure, whose power typically comes from both her age and gender.

[2] As an oak tree specifically—widely recognized as a sacred tree, or tree of life, with accompanying alchemical myths around producing essence of life potions (see Martinez in Polizzi 2025; O'Driscoll 2022; Dubuis 1997)—the centrality of the tree in this film ties together themes around magic, aging, plants, and vitality.

[3] I deliberately avoid the framing of the "vegetable" here, despite the seeming temptation to link this plantification process with people with cognitive disabilities (who are sometimes derogatively referred to as "vegetables"). Plantification better describes the process the residents are going through, because it encompasses a greater diversity of plant logic that the film employs and the natural aging process resembles.

from people who are becoming increasingly plant-like in their orientations before eventually becoming composted, I offer a tongue-in-cheek reading of the witches wherein they are functionally plant-based. And because the "plants" these witches are consuming are also human beings, the film models an allegorical vegan ecosystem wherein the consumed entities are afforded ethical consideration.[4] As opposed to getting bogged down in questions about whether plants are owed acknowledgement as sovereign agents, I use the film as a way of exploring the precarious states of sovereignty that all entities in the film, human and plant alike, take up as a result of living under an ableist, colonial-capitalist system that renders bodies unequally subject to consumption. I will suggest that the questions raised by this film invite us to reflect more generally on how our modes of consumption matter, both ethically and relationally, within plant-based ecosystems.

The main character of the film, Judith Albright (Barbara Hershey), is an aging dancer and ballet instructor who admits herself into the Golden Sun Manor Nursing Home after suffering a stroke, in the hopes of preventing her family from seeing her become "diminished." The film follows Judith as she meets and befriends the residents, including Trish, Ruth, and Roland, the witches who turn out to be in control of the nursing home. Judith's autonomy is restricted once she is admitted to the institution, especially upon being fraudulently diagnosed with dementia.[5] She is drugged and restrained against her will by the nurses and her suspicions are dismissed as mere hallucinations by her adult daughter. In a clear denunciation of the traditional nursing home model,[6] Judith and the other non-coven-aligned residents are treated poorly by the witches and the staff, being subjected to condescension, confinement, and abuse. Judith learns from Annette, her wheelchair-using roommate, that there is something preying on the residents at night. She has multiple encounters with the monster herself, which turns out to be a "minion" of the giant oak tree on the property. Upon discovering that Trish, Ruth, and Roland are using this tree

[4] While humans are generally (although not always) understood to be owed ethical consideration by dint of being human, or, more accurately, being recognized as such, the nonhuman world is largely exempted from such consideration. This exemption is in fact required in an economic, social, and legal system that is premised on continued exploitation of the nonhuman world.

[5] Diagnosis as a means of control is a long-standing practice linking back to not only female hysteria but also to the treatment of patients confined within so-called "insane asylums."

[6] The traditional care home model takes a more overtly institutional approach to its care practices, whereas more modern care homes are based around creating the illusion of comfort and independence through an emphasis on biomonitoring and technological surveillance that seek to optimize residents' health and wellness.

to sustain their own lives indefinitely by harvesting energy from the dying residents, Judith is persuaded to join the coven and replace Roland, who is killed by the oak tree monster because of some self-protective trickery on Judith's part. The film's closing images see Judith as a young woman again, restored through the nutrients of the other nursing home residents, dancing in the darkness by the oak tree alongside her grandson Josh and her new coven.

To understand this film as a vegan allegory, I will argue that the witches function as vegans in the sense that they are "plant-based" consumers: in other words, they rely on plants to survive. To make this argument, I will first explore how the film depicts the plantification of the residents, which is premised through a logic that links age to *plantiness* (or the process of becoming plant-like). I then turn to explaining how this process becomes horrifying within the witches' plant-based ecosystem and how the film's staging of these dilemmas offers a more general social commentary about the enmeshment of sovereignty and vulnerability within systems of power. I conclude with a reflection on alternative modes of relationality within consumption practices whether vegan or non-vegan, given that the film poses questions around the precarious and shifting orientations we might take toward our food.

My approach is inspired by Nicole Seymour's irreverent attitude to environmental thinking, which she offers as a remedy for public animosity toward green activism (2018, 5), rhetoric often mired in self-seriousness and despair (26). Especially in the case of veganism, discourse can become emotionally overwhelming, leading to avoidance, stagnation, and hopelessness. It is my goal to offer a more playful approach to combat this overwhelm, because as Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us, "Despair is paralysis. It robs us of agency. It blinds us to our own power and the power of the earth" (2013, 328). With attention to this emotional context, I approach the following discussion as a reflection on vegan orientations—how modes of plant-based consumption intersect with wider ideologies as well as with a broader animal ecosystem in which vegans otherwise refuse to participate. Plants—and fungi—are an important part of life for vegans, yet much of vegan literature is not centered around this recognition;[7] I would agree with Agatha Herman and Kirstie O'Neill in their assertion that vegan food systems must be considered holistically, "to understand the role plant, as well as animal, bodies and materials

[7] Vegan literature attends more closely to animal well-being than plant well-being, and for good reason. As Gary Francione puts it, "in a world in which we kill 56 billion sentient beings a year for food (not counting fish), the idea that we need to think about plants or risk being accused of 'self-righteous moralizing' is, on many levels, disturbing" (Marder and Francione 2012, part 3). More than ten years later, estimates place updated numbers between 75–92 billion (see Ritchie, 2023; Block 2023).

play in the neocolonial vegan project" (2025, 100). So, what kind of plant-based relationships do *The Manor*'s witches model for us?

Plantification in *The Manor*

My reading of this film is positioned on an interweaving trellis of vegan scholarship, ecofeminism,[8] eco-crip theory, and critical plant studies/vegetal geography (hereafter CPS). Despite their outward dissimilarities, the following discussion draws attention to how each of these frameworks share an interest in the relationships between bodies and environments, though for practical considerations I am folding this project under the wide umbrella of plant studies. Anna Lawrence has advocated for a more unified interdisciplinary formation since CPS is a fundamentally fragmented field that is brought together by researchers contending with shared dilemmas, often around plant otherness (2022, 632, 634). This otherness is grouped around a distinction from mammals specifically, since plants have no interiority (635) or central nervous system (638) and are thus fundamentally unlike mammalian bodies; idiosyncratic approaches are needed, then, to conceptualize a distinct form of plant consciousness or point of view (638). Despite its unique considerations, plant studies finds close allies with animal studies and the environmental humanities more generally, including posthumanism.[9] As Vanessa Lemm puts it with respect to the latter, both fields "advanc[e] new ways of knowing and living that de-center the human toward a more ethical relationship to plants and other forms of non-human life" (2022, 842). As part of CPS, this discussion actively works against the backgrounding of plants,[10] which tends to occur because plants seem to integrate with the scenery—since plant "bodies" are not as bounded as mammalian ones, they are less distinguishable from their environments (Lemm 2022, 847; see also Herman and O'Neill 2025, 103).

[8] Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis make a case for why not to use the ecofeminist label for interpreting works by Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway (2018, 503, 507; see especially their note 5). I use this term as an admittedly imperfect way of folding together additional writers like Linda Fisher and Sara Ahmed who pair gender studies with environmental spatialization. As Hamilton and Neimanis point out, though, it can be difficult to disentangle where the ecological and feminist aspects of this field end and begin (519).

[9] While they are closely connected, plant studies treats animal studies as a starting point for critique (see Lemm 2022, 845).

[10] This is a phenomenon known as "plant blindness," coined by James Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler in their 1999 essay.

The Manor helps shed light on these complex intersections between plants and animals by foregrounding both plants in a general sense and, more specifically, the active role of plants in vegan food systems. The film is overflowing with plant imagery and symbolism, in both its visual and thematic logic. The witches Trish and Ruth are first introduced as gardeners tending the vegetable patch on the property and growing the appropriately witchy wormwood, an herb known for, among other things, improving digestion. In addition to the gardening motif, the plant-human hybrid monster, and the visit to the oak tree—which is (oddly) described by Liesel, one of the nurses, as "something fun to do"—Judith and Annette's room is garnished with a saccharine excess of floral patterning in the wallpaper, bedspread, upholstery, and framed art. Similarly, the nursing home director's office contains various plant props such as cut flowers in a vase and a stark picture of a black tree. The film's black-and-white animated title sequence depicts a ballet dancer entangled among flowers and tree branches which intertwine with the ribbons on her pointe shoes. In their highly visible abundance, *The Manor*'s plants draw attention to the connections North American hegemonic culture makes between the elderly and flower/plant-patterning.[11] And as we will see, the architecture of the nursing home itself becomes oppressive as it simultaneously mirrors and encourages the residents' plant-like orientations.

Figure 1: One wall of Judith (Barbara Hershey, pictured) and Annette's floral-patterned room.

[11] The floral patterning in Judith and Annette's room is also specifically linked to gendered rhetoric that connects elderly women and frilly ornamentals, especially doilies.

Here I am interested in unearthing the film's subtextual preoccupation with the threat of becoming plant: at different points, Judith is visually and thematically likened to dried flowers, trees, and vegetables. This threat is even literalized by a dream Judith has after she meets the witches, wherein she is threatened by the prospect of becoming part of the oak tree, with her skin turning to bark as she places a hand on it. It's worth noting here that my characterization of plants is deliberately generalized to accommodate the unwieldy variety of vegetation at play in the film. Plants are generally subject to anonymity and homogenization for those not steeped in horticulture, but their wide variation in spatiotemporalities might make us even question "whether the broad classification of 'plant' even makes sense as an analytical category" (Lawrence 2021, 631). The prospect of becoming vegetable involves quite different stakes than becoming tree, though the film collapses these ideas into a

Figure 2: Judith places her hand on the oak tree in her dream, resulting in her flesh taking on a bark-like appearance.

shared, blurry threat of plantiness that I hope to accommodate by positing a loosely shared set of characteristics that unify this diverse grouping of organisms.

There have been other generative and fascinating approaches to the idea of becoming plant (Kim 2020; Dunning 2021), and the impulse may be to rely on anthropomorphism or its converse, phytomorphism to understand how this works.[12] However, I suggest that the film demonstrates how this process can also be understood in terms of shared and converging orientations. In this case, propagating the idea of plantification involves treating both plants and humans

[12] Phytomorphism is a term that comes from Natasha Myers (2015).

existentially and phenomenologically, according to what they do and what kinds of relationships they form. Plants grow in ways that serve their ecosystems, including humans as part of that ecosystem (Kimmerer 2003, 103; Boke 2019a, 24, 26). Similarly, humans take up certain characteristics by dint of our habits over time and the ways in which we orient toward certain objects, spaces, and entities over others (Ahmed 2006, 58; Fisher 2011, 107). How we occupy space and time, how we exist in relation to the world, in many ways determines our "character" (Ahmed 2006, 58) and situates us as a specific kind of "phenomenon"—as in, an entity defined through its context and relations (see Barad 2003, 815). According to such a paradigm, the plant-like, the aging, and the gendered parts of the nursing home residents' identities can be understood in terms of their phenomenological and relational orientations.[13] In the context of *The Manor*, being plant-like involves taking up specific spatiotemporal orientations toward the world, as does being elderly, being disabled, being female, and so on. These specifically plant-like orientations include, for instance: reaching upwards, spreading outwards, becoming rooted, facing toward the light, moving more slowly, quieting down, losing bodily coherence, becoming abject, attending to nonhuman temporality (e.g., the *longue durée* or plant time specifically),[14] and even becoming compost/sustenance.

The film emphasizes how these vectors converge through the orientations we take up as we age and move toward death and decay. As we age, our bodies undergo many changes: we shrink, our digestion slows, we may become incontinent, and we may eventually orient toward the ground when we die (depending on how burials are practiced in our cultural context). In *The Manor* we see residents taking up a variety of orientations simultaneously related to both aging and plantification, especially Judith and Annette. Annette's movements are slow; her voice has become almost imperceptible; and she spends time "rooted" in space, idling conspicuously in a sunbeam for long periods at a time. Judith more actively resists her own plantification process specifically because of perceived social stigmas around aging: she desperately wants to avoid her family seeing her grow old and her desire to maintain control over her body as a ballet dancer is based on societal expectation, despite the fact

[13] This conception of gender as based in orientation and habit is trans-inclusive; as Fisher points out, "This is not to suggest that gender is hereby conceptualized as a fixed and static category, locked in an ongoing and pre-delineated reiteration of the same. … Habit is no different" (2011, 107).

[14] Anna Lawrence and Charis Boke have explored the idea of plant time in more detail, for instance in terms of a seed's "capacity to make visible past landscapes and co-construct imagined futures" (Lawrence 2021, 631) and as a kind of move toward unhurriedness, "where human sensory experience can shift into another register, dropping its addiction to the calendar and the clock" (Boke 2019b, 207).

that she still has the physical ability to dance. [15] ("Who wants to see an old bat fluttering about in a leotard, anyway?" she sardonically asks Liesel at the prospect of taking up dancing again). Despite this resistance, she adopts certain orientations because of her age: she attends to a temporality beyond her own life, thinking of her legacy and how her memory will live on, configuring herself toward her life's *longue durée*. She even experiences a loss of coherence in a momentary hallucination of her deceased husband.

To connect people with disabilities to plants is to risk reifying the accompanying binaries of the foundational nature/culture divide (Plumwood 1993, 43).[16] It also risks entrenching the marginalization of disability through a connection to the nonhuman (see Mitchell and Snyder 2017, 556; Wheeler 2017, 595), and especially the vegetal. *The Manor* treats this link with a certain degree of horror: the film trades in fears North American society has around aging, both in terms of changing bodies and the ways bodies are interpellated by a world built for fit, able-bodied, and mobile humans. However, in recognizing this threat of further marginalization, we can also embrace the potentiality in recognizing our kinship with nonhumans. This would, however, involve a fraught, difficult, and systematic framework shift in our thinking about the nonhuman world, as well as taking a more accommodating approach to the way hegemonic society is built and organized. We need not accept that becoming more like the nonhuman might involve losing one's agency, for instance, though acknowledging more-than-human agency requires us to reconfigure what agency means with respect to action, autonomy, and dependence (see Barad 2003, 826–27; Dunning 2021, 136; Lawrence 2021, 631). As we grow older, we require increased support. However, this is not a fundamental change to the autonomy or agency we exercise in our youth; able-normative society simply positions this kind of dependency as "normal." As Anna Tsing reminds us, under late capitalism we are constantly living in a state of precarity—that is, in "a state of acknowledgment of our vulnerability to others. In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another, with or without intent" (2015, 29). In a wider sense, though, this process of moving toward the more-than-human is part of a life that includes death, and many scholars have discussed this idea to fruitful ends. For instance, Nina Lykke (2021) explores

[15] Natalie Zervou (2025) explores this specific intersection of dance in horror films. In her work, Zervou points to the fact that ballet requires total control over one's body, which can lead to monstrosity not only in the body but in the social expectations around it. This context wherein dance serves as a site of anxiety over a loss of autonomy makes sense for the logic of *The Manor*, which configures Judith's aging and plantifying body as a body in crisis.

[16] Nature/culture, female/male, disabled/able-bodied, slave/master, Indigenous/settler, and so on.

death as a process of becoming vibrant matter within the nonhuman world, Rosi Braidotti (2013) discusses the posthuman potentiality in death, Donna Haraway (2016) offers the provocation of compost humanism, Susan Bezan (2015) meditates on what she calls necro-ecologies, and Laura Kremmel (2022) describes decay as a process of multispecies union.

The Manor identifies that the links between aging and plantification are not just based in biological processes, however, but in spatial ones as well. The residents' plantification essentially comes from within and from without, in that the nursing home's architecture encourages the residents to take up plant-like orientations. This grounding in the spatial accords with Sara Ahmed's work on the relationships between bodies and their surrounding contexts, as bodies take up orientations in relation to objects in view, whether they be physical objects or "ideal objects that one identifies with" (2006, 58). Plant-like bodies shape plant-like spaces, and vice versa, just as soft bodies shape and are shaped by soft furniture (59). The suggestion here is that the flourishing and overabundance of plants and plant motifs in the nursing home's visual rhetoric encourages the residents to take on the physical features of the institution they occupy. The floral patterning in Judith and Annette's room, and the light above Judith's bed (which resembles a horizontal grow light typically used for cultivating vegetation, and casts Judith in a greenish hue), both encourage the women occupying this space to take up certain plant-like orientations.

Figure 3: Judith's bed, over which hovers a horizontal (grow) light that emits a sickly green hue.

In a phenomenological sense, the witches have engineered the residents' spaces not only to reflect their changing orientations, but also to alter them. The witches have recognized that in their plantified states, the residents can also be (re)configured as sustenance. And to do that, the witches must shape the nursing

home into a plant-based ecosystem, essentially a plant-forming terrarium that serves their ends.

The Manor's Plant-Based Witches and the Horrors of their Gardening Practices

Figures 4 and 5: Trish (Jill Larson, top) and Ruth (Fran Bennett, bottom) tending to their vegetable patch.

I read the ecosystem the witches steward as plant-based in two senses: first, because the witches use a plant—part of the oak tree—as an intermediary for the nutrients they need to survive, and second, because they rely on the plantified residents as a source of sustenance. This functionally makes them "vegans" in the literal sense of their being plant-based in their consumption practices, though there are of course many other senses in which the term *vegan*

could be understood, for instance as an ethical edict, health trend, or lifestyle (Herman and O'Neill 2025). The witches do not share with vegans any ethical commitments to reducing harm or suffering, for instance, though their consumption practices do function analogously to plant-based diet trends that promise an ability to resist the effects of human aging and even to harness the vitality of youth.[17] This is indeed part of the logic of the film: at one point an ad for Herbora plant-based supplements plays on Judith's television, pointedly asking "Wish you could recapture the beauty of your youth?" Transhuman immortality is the witches' stated goal, as they buy into the same logic that insists an ideal image of health is one that exists outside of human experiences of time. When Judith joins the witches at the end of the film, she is resisting her own plantification by exiting human temporality: they ultimately convince her that the only way she can dance again is as a sort of were-teenager, recapturing her youth every night at the witching hour by taking other residents' lives. The witches' plant-based logic intersects in this way with ideologies around age and health, wherein the fit body becomes the means of transcendence (see Ray 2017, 32) and health becomes premised on the politics of restoration and cure (see Clare 2017, 246). The film itself ultimately reinforces this messaging, by presenting Judith's decision to join the witches as the narrative solution to the "problem" posed by Judith's advancing age, wherein life for her is posited, at least by the witches and their systems of control within the nursing home, to be both limited and debilitating. Any visions of alternative modes of being as we age and plantify are thereby left to the imagination of the audience, an invitation I take up at the end of this essay.

In the remainder of this discussion, I offer an understanding of the witches' orientations as plant-based in that they turn toward plants for sustenance, and as a mediary to obtain nutrients from an ecosystem premised upon the death of organisms of all kinds (in the sense that we are all eventually composted, reintegrated into the world as nonliving matter). The first sense in which these witches are plant-based, then, is because the oak tree serves as the means by which the witches harvest sustenance from the residents; the tree's "minion" functions as a stolon,[18] untethering it from its rootedness and allowing

[17] This aspect of the film parallels other horror films like *The Wasp Woman* (Roger Corman 1959), its remake (Jim Wynorski 1995), and more recently *The Substance* (Coralie Fargeat 2024), which each stage the threat of becoming nonhuman in the process of holding back or reversing time, specifically with respect to feminine beauty standards in North America.

[18] A stolon (or "runner") is a stem that extends from plants of certain species (e.g., strawberry plants). Stolons are a mode of asexual reproduction, producing new organisms some distance away. Most oak

it to act as a roaming predator hunting on the manor's property. The generic function of the plant monster has been well recognized in earlier discussions about the tendencies of plant horror to focus on the plant as an external danger:[19] a monster that represents, for instance, a wendigo-like threat regarding human greed and uncontrolled growth.[20] In this case, the plant monster acts as a threat in that it supports the witches' agricultural system, though this system is not inherently "unnatural" except for the categorical human-plant hybridity at play. That is, the food chain in which the witches are participating accords with how plants work more generally. While most plants are not predatory, plants, like fungi, are not solely plant-based in their needs—to survive they rely on dead and decaying matter (including amino acids as means of taking up nitrogen). As they move toward death, the residents decay and thereby become closer to the nonhuman, and so as part of their biological processes tend toward becoming dirt (plant food): as Roland puts it, the humans the witches sacrifice and harvest already have "one foot in the grave." The logic of the witches' agricultural system thereby understands that these aging residents' orientations are moving toward decay and death, toward the eventual state we all do when we finally act in "subservience to a world that will inevitably consume us" (Tenga 2016, 58). According to this food system, the residents are essentially being composted,[21] serving as sustenance for the oak tree, which in turn fortifies the witches and grants them long life.[22]

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trees use acorns to propagate rather than stolons, though I find the term useful as a shorthand to describe the function (and mobility) of the oak tree's minion.

[19] Consider the abundance of plant horror films that involve a monstrous and threatening plant of some kind: *The Happening* (M. Night Shyamalan 2008), *The Ruins* (Carter Smith 2008), *Little Shop of Horrors* (Frank Oz 1986), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Philip Kaufman 1978), *The Day of the Triffids* (Steve Sekely 1963), and so on.

[20] Dawn Keetley lists six arguments as to why plants can be horrifying: they represent absolute alterity, they are often invisible to humans, they can demonstrate uncontrolled growth, they are uncanny, they are exploited and crave revenge, and they are unknowable (2016). The anthology this essay appears in contains a variety of essays exploring these various aspects (see Keetley and Tenga, eds., 2016).

[21] Since Donna Haraway's provocative notion of compost humanism (2016), scholars have taken up the charge of delineating the critical potentials of compost: for instance, how it remembers the past and how it requires care, attention, and ethical consideration (Langwick 2018, 431–32; Hamilton and Neimanis 2018, 503). Human composting specifically, while gaining relevance given the ongoing climate crisis, remains a marginal practice. Laura Kremmel has suggested that this is because it disavows the sanctity of the nature/culture divide that insists humans do not belong as part of the natural world (2022, 283).

[22] This composting process emplaces the residents-as-plants within a necro-ecology: that is, the "vital, animate process of interspecies participation and community" surrounding dead bodies (Bezan 2015, 191; see also Kremmel 2022, 274).

The second sense in which the witches are plant-based is in their treatment of the nursing home as a nursery bed, a process through which the residents become instrumentalized as sustenance. As caretakers of the space, the witches recognize that they are responsible for cultivating the relationships in their gardens (both the one for show outside the nursing home and their sustenance farming within the nursing home) in a hands-on form of caretaking (as opposed to automation in industrial agriculture, for instance)—as Stacey Ann Langwick puts it, "all gardens required tending and ongoing relationships" (2018, 429). These relationships might be based on care and kinship; however, like most produce-oriented gardening, they are ultimately based on a higher end of instrumentalization. To wit, we see that the witches have intimate relationships with their "food"—despite intending to consume her, they build camaraderie with Judith, sexually propositioning her (in the case of Roland), inviting her to join their bridge group, and playfully mocking the staff (secretly their own children) to build trust and kinship. Ruth, Trish, and Roland recognize that this kinship helps keep their system self-contained and in good working order—if Judith trusts the institution and remains in good relations with the witches, she is less likely to escape or sow chaos. This mandate to ensure order is maintained structurally as well as socially in the manor's systems and policies, which demand strict control over the residents, ensuring that no resident does anything "dramatic" or unruly. Like the cut flowers displayed in the director's office, this control functions as a weeding process: as in ornamental and productive gardens alike, plants deemed unruly are those that interfere with the desired yield or aesthetic result (see Vetere 2022, 114).

The film thus creates horror through the witches' agricultural system, which at its core stages cultural fears around becoming sustenance for others. The witches violently contravene the nursing home patients' autonomy by shifting the residents' orientations away from nourishing themselves and toward nourishing others.[23] Through the manor's policies and architecture, the witches use infrastructural tactics to oppress and restrict the functionality of their food source—by controlling the residents' relationships to their environments, they

[23] There have been various interesting takes on plants as sustenance: in her analysis of *The Vegetarian* (Han Kang 2007), Mijeong Kim meditates on the novel's exploration of how a refusal of sustenance equates to becoming plant (2020, 328). Robin Wall Kimmerer makes a similar point, eloquently writing, "Sometimes I wish I could photosynthesize so that just by being, just by shimmering at the meadow's edge or floating lazily on a pond, I could be doing the work of the world while standing silent in the sun. … But this generosity is beyond my realm, as I am a mere heterotroph, a feeder on the carbon transmuted by others. In order to live, I must consume. That's the way the world works, the exchange of a life for a life, the endless cycling between my body and the body of the world" (2013, 176–77).

ensure the residents are easier to instrumentalize and ultimately consume. Put another way, the witches create a disabling praxis by weaponizing the relationship between the residents' bodies and their environments, specifically by cutting off residents' access to support to isolate and control them. This accords with Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara's description of social disablement, wherein "the ablement of the privileged often relies on the disablement of others" (2017, 2). Disablement is thereby a process both passively enacted through the weaponized relationship between the residents and the nursing home and one that is actively propagated by the witches through their supernatural harnessing of the oak tree's stolon.

The nursing home takes away Judith's autonomy along with her support system: she is told she cannot manage her own medications, her cellphone is confiscated, and her visits from family members are strictly controlled. Doors are locked and trips outside are only allowed while accompanied by staff. Even the residents' access to light is regulated, with the nurses battling with Judith about turning off the lights at night. The drugging and physical restraints violently imposed on Judith and Annette lead to a lack of autonomy in their movements and their capacity for speech. Essentially, the residents' isolation allows the witches' ecosystem to function as intended. As opposed to being granted autonomy to grow outwards or become unruly, the residents are weeded down, controlled, and made into instruments serving the ends of the witches, undermining the sovereignty of the residents, whether as people or plants. After all, both kinds of organisms require connection and a support system to flourish; just like humans, plants are embedded—rooted—in their environment and are thereby connected to and dependent on the other forms of life within their ecosystems (Lemm 2022, 853). In this way, the witches weaponize the ableist logic of a society that insists that becoming older and becoming more like the

nonhuman is a weakness that can be instrumentalized for profit, whether that be materially or biologically.

Figure 6: Annette (Nancy Linehan Charles) sitting in a sunbeam, her expression anguished.

In a broader sense, the film plays on fears around the natural changes to our bodies that occur through aging and its concomitant orientations toward plantification, a state of being that involves the continual process of disablement, in the sense that as we age we require greater accessibility and accommodations for a body that less and less "fits" within a normative anthropocentric society.[24] As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, "Our experience of living eventually contradicts our collective fantasy that the body is stable, predictable, or controllable, creating misfits for all of us" (2011, 603). *The Manor* demonstrates that this is as much a social process as it is a biological reality. At one point Trish tells Judith, "Once you're here, you become irrelevant to society," simultaneously exposing and weaponizing the way the elderly are configured in neoliberal capitalist societies where one's value is determined by one's productivity.[25] The social model of disability I am discussing here locates vulnerability within the fit between a body and its environment rather than in the body itself (600; Kafer 2017, 201), though *The Manor* exploits the horrors of both. The witches and by extension the film itself instrumentalize the social stigmas against becoming disabled (a process that includes aging), which are

[24] Aging bodies can require accessibility aids or prostheses, including walking aids, hearing aids, visibility aids, and so on. My grandmother referred to her increasing dependence on machines, medications, and physical devices, as a system that was "propping [her] up."

[25] In making this comment, Trish is attempting to exacerbate Judith's isolation from the outside world by suggesting that she only matters to the residents of the nursing home. In this sense, the social and physical isolation imposed by the witches is a way of configuring our dependence on other people and social supports into a weapon of control.

based around a fear of dependency, both on other people and technological aids (Ray 2017, 39). The film thus depicts the naturally aging body as a series of horrors, which involve confronting not only a changing body (one that is abjectified, disembodied, and decaying) but also the way that capitalist societies treat aging bodies, specifically feminine ones, as undesirable and dispensable (especially when placed in the context of the nursing home, a space often regarded as the site of the discarded human awaiting nothing but death).

In this way, the witches' agricultural system specifically relies on an ableist logic to function, a logic that reflects the wider ableist values of a society that includes prioritizing the healthy over the sick and the more over the less rational.[26] Accordingly, the logic they use to seduce Judith to their side involves weaponizing society's ableism directly:

> Judith: The lives you sacrificed.
> Trish: Are they really living? They merely exist. They're awaiting death. They're ghosts. That's your future, Judith.
> …
> Ruth: A useless existence in a broken body.
> Trish: Think about it, Judith. No more limping. No more pain, no more disease. We *dance*, Judith.

The witches rely here on what Garland-Thomson refers to as "the social process of disablement" (2011, 591) wherein it is not Judith's aging, plantifying body that causes her to give up on the prospect of dancing as she ages (early in the film, she even tries on her pointe shoes again), it is the social stigma that weaponizes the difference between an aging female body and an idealized, productive one. The witches convince Judith that the only way she can dance again is to instrumentalize her fellow nursing home residents as sustenance, to rob them of their own joy as they dance in the nursing home's ballet class by draining them of their life energy to sustain and rejuvenate herself. The film doesn't linger on the sociopolitical consequences of her decision or condemn her actions directly, but at the end of the film we can see Judith adhering to the same ableist and capitalist logic asserted by the witches and by society at large:

[26] I invoke the term *rationality* as far as it is used as a political weapon to divide the human from the nonhuman. Rationality as a metric for one's humanity (constructing the human as such) is rooted in the logics of colonialism and patriarchy and serves to divide the extractor from the resource in capitalism broadly. Thus not only is the witches' ableism tied up in COVID-19 pandemic rhetoric, it also ties in with the speciesist logic used to justify the mass suffering and death of animals deemed lesser than ourselves.

that dance belongs only to youthful bodies and that those in control of institutions are the ones that are allowed to profit from them.

As already noted, *The Manor* offers a scathing critique of the traditional care home model, and it accordingly has stakes for discussions around elder abuse, which is relatively common in nursing homes across the world (see Drennan et al. 2012 in Ireland; Botngård et al. 2020 and Myhre et al. 2020, both in Norway). However, the treatment of the residents is also connected to the logics of capitalism broadly and animal agriculture specifically: the living conditions the residents are subject to resemble those of farmed animals, whose conditions and treatment are often framed as "ethical" in allowing livestock a "good life" up until, of course, they are killed. It is in this way that the film stages a secondary vegan allegory in comparing the residents not only to plants but also to nonhuman animals. Like other animals used for food, the plantified residents are restrained and drugged, their access to the outdoors is controlled, they are separated from their family members, and they are subjected to a lingering anticipatory fear, not of a natural death, but of their own murders. The kind of agricultural system run by the witches, while masquerading as plant-based living, thereby remains imbricated within the same oppressive social structures that exist within both human society and animal agriculture that cause inhabitants of both to become violently instrumentalized.

The horrors of *The Manor*, then, are primarily located in two places: first, there is horror in the taxonomic blurring the witches are enabling, a classic tenet of the horror genre (Carroll 1990, 43). As we have seen, the film cultivates the horrors of confronting an aging body's abjectification, hybridity, and surrounding social stigma; however, it also prompts a confrontation with a concomitant ethical horror. In treating humans as if they were plants, the witches point to the contingency of the human—the fact that the human has always been a political category.[27] The witches functionally act as flat ontologists: they treat select humans with the same (lack of) ethical consideration typically given to plants or nonhuman animals. This is horrific in a double sense: either humans are not owed as much moral consideration as we would like to think, or the more-than-human world is owed much more. In this view, not only are the categories that separate humans from nonhumans arbitrary and flexible (think of the fact that Judith demonstrates physical and social mobility by eventually joining the witches), but that each part of our

[27] See various related critiques of posthumanism, especially in Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018).

ecosystem might in fact be afforded moral consideration: whether plant, human, or animal.

In addition to the witches' flat ontology, there is also clearly horror in the witches' agricultural practices—that is, the kinds of relationships they have with their food. The disabling praxis of the witches brings to the fore the fact that our consumption-based relationships are fundamentally anchored in wider systems of power. The plant-based ecosystem depicted in *The Manor* demonstrates how historical injustices perpetuate in all food systems, even ones in which we "get to know our food." This is a critique made in vegan literature too, which points out that even if vegans refuse to consume animal flesh and products, a plant-based ecosystem nevertheless participates in an ideological structure that prioritizes speciesism, ageism, ableism, and ultimately the kind of instrumentalism that arises from colonial-capitalism (see Lawrence 2021, 638; Marder and Francione 2012, part 1; Herman and O'Neill 2025, 97). We see this in the film when the residents' ability to remain in relation with one another is compromised and their capacity for mutual nourishment is cut off, as they become a means to an end within the witches' agricultural system. And not only this, the witches' consumption practices do violence to their own lives in that they reduce the beings around them to pure instrumental functions. Their world has become restricted and their ability to form other kinds of relationality has been stripped away. The results of the witches' agricultural system—an ableist, speciesist, and capitalist order—indicate that part of the horrors of consumption accord with our not being able to establish or sustain sovereign relations with our food. Taken together, the witches' agricultural system portrays the horror of sovereignty contravened, revealing that sovereignty is always contingent within a world built upon chains of consumption.

Conclusions: Turning Toward a Kingdom of Plants?

While this discussion has been premised upon an allegorical reading of *The Manor*, I believe it offers some insight into how all consumption practices, plant-based and otherwise, are imbricated within oppressive and interlocking structures of power that make it terrifying to contemplate becoming sustenance within such a system. Accordingly, I offer the remainder of this discussion as an exploration of an alternative mode of consumption outside of what the witches practice in *The Manor*, one based upon mutual caretaking and sovereignty. But first we might begin by asking: what does it mean to take nonhuman sovereignty seriously?

Writing from the starting point of Potawatomi cultural tenets, Robin Wall Kimmerer grapples in *Braiding Sweetgrass* with how to live in good relation with a world that gives us the gifts we need to live: food, oxygen, raw materials, and so on. "We get them for free," she writes, "They do their share for us. The question is: How well do we do by them?" (2013, 170). She posits that phytoremediation and other restoration projects based upon instrumentalization are incapable of restoring our relationships with the more-than-human world:

> This kind of fix [phytoremediation] is at the core of the mechanistic view of nature, in which land is a machine and humans are the drivers. In this reductionist, materialist paradigm an imposed engineering solution makes sense. But what if we took the indigenous worldview? The ecosystem is not a machine, but a community of sovereign beings, subjects rather than objects. What if those beings were the drivers? (331)

As opposed to carelessly "taking" this worldview and attempting to apply it to settler agriculture, I am viewing Kimmerer's words as an invitation to consider what sovereignty is and can be within settler food systems, including the one modelled in *The Manor*. Despite its playfulness, the film demonstrates an opportunity to offer moral consideration to the organisms we consume, which has stakes for both vegans and non-vegans alike.

Part of the witches' monstrosity lies in their disregard of the autonomy and sovereignty of their food: they are not in the sort of good relation Kimmerer describes, which might involve gratitude, care, and reciprocity (or at least our imperfect attempts at it). The witches' attitude remains exceptionalist, colonial, and abusive rather than communal, relational, and symbiotic. *The Manor* demonstrates that undermining the sovereignty of what we consume involves violence, not just to our food but to ourselves, as we become more oriented toward an exclusively instrumentalizing praxis toward the beings around us. This film demonstrates that what erodes when we do not treat our food as sovereign—when we do not acknowledge and respect our relationality with it—is our own capacity for respect and gratitude.

If we were to try seeding nonhuman sovereignty, including sovereignty of the vegetal, we would encounter some knotty problems in settler-colonial cultures. First, this type of reorientation involves learning to better understand the needs of the more-than-human world, a topic considered in prior scholarship, for instance in critical plant studies with respect to plant listening and working toward understanding plants as communicative others (see Boke

2019a, 2019b; Kimmerer 2013; Lawrence 2021). Second, recognizing nonhuman sovereignty involves circumnavigating a Westphalian model of sovereignty that asserts that sovereignty is exclusively a human concept and exists outside of wilderness (see Kuehls 2003, 188; Papadopoulos 2023, 586).[28] And third, it involves navigating the problem of harm—essentially, how might we view something that we consume as sovereign, whether it be plant or animal (Lawrence 2021, 638), even when it is harmed by our consumption? Eating another organism is not a mutually beneficial relationship between individuals: "When we as human beings eat something, it presupposes the death or disappearance of that thing" (Kim 2020, 338). However, for those of us who are concerned with minimizing harm and who thereby rely on plants to survive, we may seek to reframe how sustainability and justice within food systems might be based around communal well-being as opposed to solely around the rights of individuals. Vanessa Lemm describes such justice as "an asymmetrical relationship of gift-giving that is inherently a-economic and where what binds us to each other is the fact that we owe each other. We are bound to each other by an infinite responsibility to each other, an infinite debt that can never exhaust itself" (2022, 852–53). Perhaps we can work toward this mode of relationality with a change in orientation toward our food. After all, sovereignty is established in relation, not in isolation—it requires mutual respect, recognition of agency and autonomy, as well as a shared moral responsibility (Kuehls 2003, 180; Kimmerer 2013, 57–58; Simpson 2017, 141; Stewart 2022, 149–55). In other words, perhaps seeding plant sovereignty requires a change in our orientation from instrumentalization toward embracing respect and vulnerability as well as acknowledging our converging orientations.

Consumption can be thought of in different ways: as appropriative,[29] exploitative, and instrumentalizing, but also as joyful, intimate, vulnerable, and integrative. When we eat something, we attune to it—indeed, we are, in many rhizomatic layers, what we eat. Those of us that use plants as sustenance can thereby transform relations with the world through our relationality with our food; as Charis Boke puts it, "plants in their living forms can offer medicines by way of relationship" (2019a, 24). Herbivores, omnivores, and even (indirectly) carnivores all rely on vegetation to survive—like the witches in *The Manor*, we are dependent upon and vulnerable to our food systems, which are

[28] Nonhuman entities including the Magpie River in Québec have been granted the legal status of personhood, which leads to difficulties navigating the intricacies of a legal system that is not set up to afford nonhuman entities rights (see Arnold 2022).

[29] I am thinking here of bell hooks's famous essay, "Eating the Other" (1992).

in turn premised upon broader structures of oppression. But in spite of—and indeed because of—this wider ecosystem, our relationships do matter. *The Manor* offers some food for thought, including a consideration of our own ethical obligations to what we consume. Our orientations toward our sustenance—not only what we eat, but how we eat it—yield different stakes for our relationships with the wider ecosystem. It's worth keeping in mind at the very least that these relationships are circular—we mutually nourish the other organisms we depend on and in turn depend on us: in other words, consumption is not a unidirectional praxis.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone that I spoke with about this project over the course of its development, including my very generous anonymous reviewer and the participants at the SSHRC-funded workshop "Horror Ecologies: Un/human Body Genres, New Materialisms, New Methodologies," held 8-12 July, 2024 in Montréal, and especially Salma, Jenni, Lorna, Sebastian, Natalie, Mike, Ryan, and Kristopher for generously sharing your time, thoughts, and converging orientations with me.

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- 2025 -

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