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Holistic Stories of the Whole:
Trees and Humans in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*

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Abstract

This paper explores the interplay between human and non-human systems as depicted in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. Powers asserts that human and environmental systems are deeply connected and mutually dependent, challenging anthropocentric views that regard nature and non-humans as separate and inferior. Powers reacts to the destruction of nature amidst human interests, seeing trees as marginalized entities within the Anthropocene. The novel is a prime example of an environmental text that effectively problematizes this issue. He portrays trees as significant creatures in humans' lives. The lives of the trees intricately connect with those of nine human characters and their families, and they affect people's lives in various ways. *The Overstory* highlights the interconnectedness and the vital role trees play in human lives. Apart from their significance in human experiences, the novel also celebrates the importance of trees in the ecosystem. *The Overstory* illustrates human efforts to protect these living entities, emphasizing the common bonds formed through shared struggles against tree decay caused by illness or human impact. Lastly, the novel endows trees with resilience and agency, positioning them as central protagonists. By focusing on specific trees that bind generations and offer refuge, the narrative likens them to humans. They are conscious and intellectual creatures who deserve respect and value. The paper aims to exemplify Powers' holistic approach to fictionalizing the intrinsic value of trees and portraying them as vital components of the world, rather than marginalizing them as objects.

Keywords: trees; marginalization; Richard Powers; anthropocentric; biocentric.

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Trees have been analyzed and studied for centuries for scientific and aesthetic purposes in fields such as biology, art, botany, philosophy, and literature. They are essential in human lives, from providing resources to offer shade, to purifying the air, and serving as the home for many animals and plants. However, despite their significance and our dependence on them, they are among the most exploited living organisms in the planet. In the Anthropocene era, human existence and behaviors have caused inescapable and profound changes to the Earth's geology and environment. Humans are responsible for altering the planet's structure. These drastic changes affect everything in nature. Disasters like climate change, deforestation, and wildfires… are all results of the Anthropocene, leaving trees as helpless victims. One of the primary reasons for this is the anthropocentric viewpoint, which prioritizes the importance and needs of humans over those of all other living and nonliving things. This mindset places humans at the center of the universe, relegating non-humans to the periphery, where they lack agency and importance. Trees, along with all non-human life, derive their value from their usefulness to humanity. This viewpoint is valid in the literary world too. In "Arboreal Imaginaries," Solvejg Nitzke writes: "Despite this long tradition, trees have been marginalized in literary and cultural studies as just motifs and symbols, that is, as something which stands for human interests and stories, not for themselves" (Nitzke 341).

Literature reflects all these ecological themes and their reflections on society, economy, and culture. Writers and philosophers have responded to the devaluation and destruction of nature, producing a greater number of nature-based and ecocritical works in the last decade. Lawrence Buell outlines four criteria in defining an environmental text: First, nature should play an essential role in the narrative. The text should include the negative impacts of human beings and human accountability on the natural world. It should also include the ethics of survival and raise questions about both human and non-human survival. And

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lastly, the text should emphasize the interconnectedness among all living beings (Buell 1995, 7-8). In these literary works, humans and non-human beings are portrayed as interdependent, reflecting an ecocentric rather than anthropocentric perspective.

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is a prominent example of environmental literature that takes a holistic view of both non-human and human beings. The novel centers on trees within its narrative. They have been the unseen and silent beings that have existed around us throughout human history, but with Powers' novel, trees have agency, long lifespans, and qualities similar to those of human characters. In an article, "The Tree is Saying Things in Words before Words," Pia Masiero mentions the structure of the novel, which stands as an extended metaphor of a tree (Masiero 2020, 136). The novel comprises eight chapters, all organized under the sub-chapters named after parts of trees: Roots, trunk, crown, and seeds. Throughout the book, we encounter how the lives of all the characters are entangled with a particular tree or trees in general.

In one story, we see an American Chestnut tree planted in Iowa by Norwegian immigrants. Their descendant, Nick Hoel, gets artistic inspiration from the trees. In another story, a Chinese immigrant family lives around a Mulberry tree. The daughter, Mimi Ma, later becomes an activist because of her family memories around the tree. Another character who fights for the rights of the trees is a pilot named Douglas Pavlicek, who was saved by a banyan tree when he was blown out of an airplane during the Vietnam War. It is a literal and symbolic example of the life-saving effect of trees. Another character Neelay Mehta became disabled at age 11, falling from an oak tree. However, as a computer game producer later in his life, he created alternative worlds in his games, forming unusual and almost unreal spaces inspired by real trees. Ray Brinkman and his wife Dorothy, who are the ones who care about trees the least, decide to plant a tree every year on their wedding anniversary. Another protagonist, Patricia Westerford, is a plant scientist who dedicated

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her life to studying trees. Adam Apich has a boyhood attachment to a maple tree. Finally, a college student, Olivia Vandergriff begins to hear the voices of trees after a near-death experience and dedicates her life to saving them from destruction.

Whole trees and humans are interconnected

Richard Powers uses the theme of interconnectedness in the novel to restore the dignity of trees. They are depicted as living organisms connected to human beings, existing alongside them for a lifetime and sometimes profoundly affecting their lives. The concept of interconnectedness has been a prominent idea since the 19th-century Transcendentalist movement. In Nature, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes that there is a deep and secret connection between plant life and human beings:

> The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right (Emerson qtd in Brooks 1940, 7).

Emerson claims that the non-human world is an inseparable part of humans' lives. This is a challenge to the anthropocentric worldview. As Lawrence Buell states in *The Environmental Imagination,* all living creatures are subjects related to others: "The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest" (Buell 1995, 7-8).

Another challenge to the anthropocentric worldview is the concept of deep ecology. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess points out that everything in nature is interrelated, where a change in one thing affects the others. As par Naess deep ecologists:

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> adopt a biocentric/ ecocentric perspective that proposes a 'biospheric egalitarianism' in which the interest of the biosphere overrides the interests of individual species, including the human…deep ecology challenges the anthropocentrism at the heart of modern society and the kind of shallow ecological standpoints that see the natural world as merely a resource for humanity and presuppose that human needs and demands override other considerations (Marland 2013, 850).

According to these various philosophical and environmental movements, all living beings have value, regardless of their utility to human needs. This ecocentric perspective views humans as coexisting with, rather than separate from, the wider natural world. Correspondingly, the stories in Richard Powers' novel highlight every tree's value in the lives of the protagonists. The trees touch the lives of the individuals, become their reasons for living, or change the course of their lives. Powers explains this as such: "You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes" * (166). *The Overstory* adopts a holistic approach to the environment, meaning that all beings on Earth coexist as part of a whole

In Powers' stories, trees and humans coexist side by side as people grow old and families evolve, but they remain as their lifespan exceeds that of humans. The first story revolves around a Norwegian immigrant family living near a chestnut tree. The tree was brought from New York to Iowa in the 19th century via six chestnut seeds carried in the pockets of travelers, and it has since grown hundreds of miles away from its natural habitat. The family created a family tradition of photographing the tree every month from the same angle from the 1910s to the early 1980s. As the narrator puts it: "It is a monthly exercise in noticing a thing worth no notice at all, a creature as steadfast and reticent as life" (17). The family's last member, the grandson, created a flipbook from the photographs: As seasons change, the tree witnesses generations of the family.

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Another example of how people respect and view trees as part of their family histories and traditions is that of a Chinese family that planted a mulberry tree in their garden. The family plants trees in their garden for their four children as they are born. The children adopt a particular tree as theirs, watching it grow into adulthood alongside them. Their lives revolve around it, with both the best times of the children playing on the tree and the tragic moment when the father commits suicide, leaving blood on the tree. The mulberry tree has an important place in their lives: "Mimi looks at the rings on the cut tree, which run backward to the circle's center. She remembers everything the tree witnessed in her life, year by year. The year his father died, the year she graduated, back to the year she was a child" (258). In the novel, another example of people bonding with trees is a couple who care the least about them. They are described as such: "two people for whom trees mean almost nothing. Two people, even in the spring of their lives, can't tell an oak from a linden" (80). However, as they grow older in life, they change; they decide to plant trees and look after them as if they were their own children.

The Overstory challenges 'the human-centeredness syndrome' that values non-human organisms for the use they provide for humans. The novel connects the human and non-human protagonists together, much like a mycelium —a chemical network of interconnected roots. (Masiero 137). Masiero suggests that the novel's plot design also exemplifies this union. People and trees each have their roots separated in the first place, but get together within a trunk and spread their seeds for future generations and new trees. This cyclical organization predominated the novel's stories (Masiero 139). As the trees have relations among their various parts, so can people and trees be connected. The structure of the novel that aligns different characters and their stories reflects the interconnectedness of life, just like nature (Stewart 168).

In *The Overstory*, trees are more than living creatures around people; they are a part of

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the families, as siblings and brothers. In other stories within the book, trees save people's lives; sometimes, trees change people's viewpoints about nature forever. For many protagonists in the novel, trees become their raison d'être for living. They dedicate their lives to studying them or fighting for the rights of these living creatures.

Whole trees are vital for the ecosystem

The second theme Powers uses to counter the marginalization of trees is to highlight the vital role trees play for humans and the entire ecosystem. The human destruction of the ecosystem has elicited a range of reactions from various disciplines. For example, from an ecocritical perspective, it constitutes one of the main issues of third-wave ecology, which focuses on the environmental damage caused by global capitalism (Marland 2013, 855). *The Overstory* asserts that people are largely unaware of the commodification of nature and the profit-driven deforestation (Masiero 143). The overconsumption of non-human entities for the sake of money devalues the most essential elements of the ecosystem. Babette Tischleder argues that the system of obsolescence further causes the marginalization of non-human creatures like trees:

> Progress and convenience are built on systematic obsolescence, not just the obsolescence of daily disposables…but the coldly calculated obsolescence of the lives of others—the exploitation of human labor and non-human bodies that are utilized, eradicated, poisoned, deprived of their subsistence, left to die or killed for consumption and economic profit. The industrial and economic exploitation of trees further marginalizes their value as living organisms, reducing them to mere profit-driven commodities. In many places worldwide, areas with trees are overexploited, burned for agricultural use, and polluted with urban and industrial waste (Tischleder 2019, 14).

Powers opposes this system where trees are commodified and exploited for consumption and production. In *The Overstory*, many characters unite at the novel's end against the logging industry and corporations that cut trees in pursuit of capitalist gain.

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One of the characters, Olivia Vandergriff, undergoes a life-changing experience as she recognizes the vitality of the trees. She was a carefree college student who was not concerned with environmental issues in the early part of the novel. However, after a near-death experience, she undergoes a spiritual and psychological transformation. She begins to hear the voices of the trees and gets involved in eco-activism. Her mission becomes to protect trees and forests. When she encounters large trucks carrying timber people inform her that: "The industry is cashing out every salable scrap of timber in the inventory. Which in this case means lots of seven and eight-hundred-year-old trees. Trees wider than your dreams are going into mill B and coming out as planks" (267). Nitzke mentions a similar cultural disrespect for trees. He claims that human beings' drive to shape and control the natural landscape poses a significant danger to the trees. People exploit trees for timber and for settlement, thus endangering the whole ecosystem too (Nitzke 2). The novel criticizes the anthropocentric view of the forest as an infinite source of consumption. Trees are more than that; they are our kin. As Diana Bresford Kroeger writes in "To Speak for the Trees", trees and humans share a common history and a connection:

> I want to remind you that the forest is far more than a source of timber. It is our collective medicine cabinet. It is our lungs. It is the regulatory system for our climate and our oceans. It is the mantle of our planet. It is the health and well-being of our children and grandchildren. It is our sacred home. It is our salvation. Trees offer us the solution to nearly every problem facing humanity today, from defending against drug resistance to halting global temperature rise, and they are eager to share those answers. They do so even when we can't or won't hear them. We once knew how to listen. It is a skill we must remember (Bresford- Kroeger 2021, 13).

In the novel, as the characters come to understand their vitality, they begin to hear the trees both literally and metaphorically.

Powers aims to illustrate how the trees are marginalized despite their vitality through the medium of storytelling with this novel. A fictional cautionary tale for trees will be more

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effective than merely scientific articles about the' importance of trees to the ecosystem and people's lives. Scott Slovic discusses a psychological phenomenon related to our emotional responses to natural disasters. He claims that human beings are insensitive when presented with numerical information. It means that people care less if a disaster affects a large number of people or a significant area of land. However, if the same disaster is narrated from the perspective of a single person, animal, or house with a story, it becomes more effective and poignant (Slovic). Therefore, it is no longer just a number but a subject. People are more inclined to hear about what happened to specific trees, necessary for the culture of a town, or a family, than hearing about hectares of forests deforested.

The power of storytelling is a central element to bring awareness to the vitality of the trees in the novel. In the section focused on Ray and Dorothy. Ray, who is living with the aftermath of a stroke, has developed a deep appreciation for fiction. Fiction now serves as a powerful means of passing time and finding comfort for him. It not only takes a lot of his time, but also he starts to give so much importance to the details and plots. Powers wants to emphasize how human beings are affected with emotionally satisfying stories like real life. In contrast, it argues that life operates on a much broader scale, and that the world suffers because fiction often fails to portray the urgency of global crises with the same intensity it gives to individual human struggles (322).

In an interview, Powers had mentioned the power of storytelling as opposed to abstract information for creating a consciousness. He says:

> Fiction, of course, is an instrument of consciousness. Through fiction we can see someone looking at nature, struggling to understand the intelligence that is both larger and smaller than his own. Or slower and faster than his own... This is precisely what fiction can do. The novelist knows that our stories about nature are stories about ourselves. He can explicitly focalize the anxieties, the narratives, the hopes, the fears, and the dreams that bind us together in this complicated and terrifying web. A novel can make a human viscerally aware of our estrangement from nature in ways that nonfiction cannot (Hermanson).

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In Powers' novel, one of the characters, Patricia tries to find such an effective way while writing her book on trees. She gives examples from a real tree in Norway, the "old Tjikko", almost nine thousand years old. She says she kept thinking about the tree for all these centuries, "dying and resurrecting" (277). She discovered at the end that the tree is there to remind humankind that "the world is not made for our utility" (277). The individual stories of trees serve to exhibit an ecocentric worldview. Trees are like miracles for Patricia: "creatures-bigger, slower, older, more durable-call the shots, make the weather, feed creation, and create the very air. It is a great idea- trees. So great that evolution keeps inventing it, again and again" (143). She further says: "We all travel the Milky Way together, trees and men…in every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks. The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness" (156). Moreover, she recites Buddha's words: "A tree is a wondrous thing that shelters, feeds, and protects all living things. It even offers shade to the axman who destroys it" (277). However, despite their excellent presence for human beings, they are marginalized. In *The Overstory*, Powers narrates the story of different trees, including their history and their individual and cultural significance. Trees are essential, each one of them. He writes about how we exploit trees: "A third to a half of existing species may go extinct by the time I'm gone." "Tens of thousands of trees we know nothing about. Species we've barely classified. Like burning down the library, art museum, pharmacy, and hall of records, all at once" (382).

The Overstory expresses many concerns of the twenty-first century, including the marginalization of trees, and exemplifies the resulting eco-anxiety and environmental grief that characterize contemporary environmental consciousness. These concepts define how humans perceive and respond to the ecological disasters that surround them. Humans witness habitat loss, the extinction of species, air pollution, and a rise in temperatures, all of

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which create an uneasy disturbance that affects people's psychologies. The characters in the novel also experience these feelings like the rest of the world. Therefore, they react when they see the destruction of the forests. One of the characters ask: "What's crazier? Believing there might be nearby presences we don't know about? or cutting down the last few ancient redwoods on Earth for decking and shingles" (222). The loss of trees affects their lives on a large scale and the trauma of their deaths has an enormous impact on their lives. This demonstrates how trees constitute such great importance for humankind as a whole and the ecosystem they live in. In an interview, Powers says that novels are like myths that help people see the world differently and perceive it from a perspective beyond their self-interests (Hamner). This way, literature adopts a more tree- and nature-conscious approach to ecological problems and celebrates the vitality of these solutions.

Whole Trees are like Human Beings

The third way Powers responds to the marginalization of trees in the novel is by portraying them as living organisms, much like his human characters. He eliminates the distinction between humans and the vegetal world by attributing human qualities such as intelligence and sensibility to trees. Birgit Spengler in *Arboreal Encounters* refers to this as 're-narrativization': a new way of perceiving human and non-human relations: "What is known today about the lives of trees and plants can have a large-scale effect on how we think time, space, and the relationality of existence, if we allow these insights to unsettle long-held certainties about the ostensible distinctions and hierarchies between human and so- called vegetal life in terms of agency and forms of intelligence" (Spengler 2019, 69). This plant-centered view presents trees as living creatures similar to human beings, therefore eradicating their objectification. In the novel, Patricia summarizes this: "This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived (530).

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Many late scientific discoveries have proven that trees possess agency, knowledge, and specific communication skills. The concept of arboreal communication is one of the areas that has been explored by various scientists in the last decade of the twenty-first century. One of these prominent scientists is Peter Wohlleben, who studied and worked in the forest industry. He had written "*The Secret Life of Trees,*" in which he presented trees as social creatures who communicate with one another. In forests, trees are interconnected, and they support one another through their root systems. Therefore, a tree can only be as strong as the forest surrounding it (Wohlleben 29). Moreover, he also states that trees have their own language; they can spread a particular scent to warn other trees in case of danger (Wohlleben 20), and they can make sounds, such as vibrations, when they are thirsty (Wohlleben 57).

Canadian scientist Suzanne Simard made groundbreaking discoveries about how trees interact with one another. She studied the underground network of forests using fungi and roots. She says that they exchange carbon, water, nutrients, and defense signals with each other. She utters the concept of 'the mother tree' which acts as the center of this network. She demonstrates that cooperation is essential for the resilience of trees in the face of various disturbances and dangers. In her 2016 TED talk, Simard further discusses the interdependency among forests, likening them to human communities. Mother trees take care of their siblings, sending signals when they are in distress or in danger of dying. This further proves that they possess feelings such as fear, and are capable of using language. They are not simple organisms but complex systems with support systems and even have memories. She coined the word 'wood wide web' referring to the communication of trees among each other through roots and fungi. (Simard 2016). In *The Overstory*, the character Patricia Westford was inspired by her. She mentions many times that trees communicate with each other and humans.

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The new materialist theory posits that non-human beings possess agency and vitality, in contrast to human exceptionalism, which marginalizes non-human entities. In *The Overstory*, trees are the central figures; they communicate, respond to their environments, and shape the lives of human characters. On the first page of the novel, trees are said to speak, remember, gossip, laugh, "in the lowest frequencies," which almost completely evade humans (5). There are many instances in the book where trees are depicted with human traits: " loner trees, cunning trees, sages and solid citizens, trees that turn impulsive or shy or generous…This is not our world with trees in it. It is a world of trees, where humans have just arrived" (530). Patricia Westerford gives examples of trees and forests as agents in one of her public lectures. She says, "A forest knows things. They wire themselves up underground. There are brains down there, ones our own brains aren't shaped to see. Root plasticity, solving problems and making decisions. Fungal synapses. What else do you want to call it? Link enough trees together, and a forest grows aware" (453). Trees in the novel are social; they remember and feel. These human-like characteristics empower them as creatures capable of reacting to the outside world.

Michael Marder argues that plants are not passive but active, and he calls this view "plant thinking". They have a peculiar way of existing, thinking, and even moving and remembering like other creatures. The life of plants is coextensive with the mode of thinking appropriate to them. Their turning and moving to the sun, their closing of leaves in response to touch or light are all examples of the non-conscious act of plants. It is a way to "store imageless and nonrepresentational material memories in their cells, and so to retain a trace of the remembered thing itself, in place of its idealized projection. Whereas humans remember whatever has phenomenally appeared in the light, plants keep the memory of light itself" (Marder 2013, 117). Michael Pollan also speaks of a radical new paradigm in our understanding of life referring to the field of plant neurology: "Its

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proponents believe that we must stop regarding plants as passive objects—the mute, immobile furniture of our world—and begin to treat them as protagonists in their own dramas, highly skilled in the ways of contending in nature" (Pollan 2013). New discoveries in plant neurobiology also defends their agency. The new theories suggest that they are "information processing organisms with complex communication skills" (Gagliano et al 2017, xii).

American scientist and enrolled member of the Indigenous Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, has described how the vocabulary and grammar profoundly impact the way the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world is imagined, conducted, and represented. She compares the language of science, European languages, and Indigenous languages: "Science can be a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects" (Kimmerer 2013, 49). As she states:

> They are not mere objects—When we tell them the tree is not a who, but an it, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying it makes a living land into 'natural resources.' If a maple is an it, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a her, we think twice (Kimmerer 2013, 57).

The characters in *The Overstory* coexist alongside human beings. Their human-like depictions, as well as their assistance and support in people's lives, foster a harmonious coexistence between non-human life and humans. This viewpoint, which is dominant in the novel, attributes agency to trees that have been previously neglected. People in the novel care for the trees not because they are helpful or profitable but because they are living. They move from a stance of exclusion and domination to inclusion. Their primary aim is to enable these giant and resilient creatures to survive and resist the dangers posed by the greed and negligence of society. Douglas Pavlicek tells them, "Hang on. Only ten or twenty

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decades. Child's play for you guys. You just have to outlast us. Then no one will be left to f. you over" (113). In the novel, people converse with trees, hug them, and risk their lives for the sake of trees.

In an interview with Richard Powers, he explains the reason why he used trees as characters in his novel:

> At the heart of the book is a rejection of human exceptionalism—the idea that we're the only things on earth with will, memory, flexible response to change, agency or community. Research has shown in many amazing ways that trees possess all these things. The ability to *see* trees—which we'll need to recover if we hope to stay on this planet much longer—means learning to appreciate how our private stories are never totally independent from the stories of trees. Trees are significant characters in every human life. They deserve to be characters in their own stories as well (Rose).

In *The Overstory*, there are many anthropomorphic depictions of trees. These create a more effective way of comprehending their existence. They are depicted as such: "Best tree you could ever want to see. Strong and wide but full of grace, flaring out nobly at the base, into its own plinth. Generous with nuts that feed all comers…. elegant with sturdy boughs so much like human arms, lifting upward at the tips like hands proffering. Hazy and pale in spring, but in autumn, its flat, wide sprays bathe the air in gold" (144). In another section, the novel mentions how the wounded trees send out an alarm to the other trees through a scent. "Her maples are signaling. They're linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system across acres of woodland. These brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other" (158). This is another way to provide agency for them, showing how they communicate just like human beings.

In "Organic Reformation in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*", Garrett Stewart claims that quasi-personified trees have a choral narrative. They communicate with biochemical signals and roots. It is their way of being responsive and conscious. Trees have an organic

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story to tell with their own language (Stewart 165). *The Overstory* demonstrates that even static things have cycles of life and a narration of themselves (Stewart 170).

Moreover, in some other examples, trees act consciously like human beings, having knowledge about certain things: "Trees know when we're close by. The chemistry of their roots and the perfumes their leaves pump out change when we're near…When you feel good after a walk in the woods, it may be that certain species are bribing you. … Trees have long been trying to reach us. But they speak on frequencies too low for people to hear" (530).

Depicting them as human beings provides them not only agency but also visibility. In *The Language of Plants*, Gagliano states that society suffers from plant blindness as another reason for the marginalization of trees. This blindness refers to the inability to see and recognize plants around us. It also refers to not giving enough importance to their existence (Gagliano et al 2017, vii). As Patricia's father tells her, people are "plant-blind. Adam's curse. We only see things that look like us. Sad story". (143). Her father teaches her how to see these creatures around them. Just like the novel that aims to change the mindset of perceiving trees as passive, non-moving, non-human, and unimportant organisms in the Western world.

Conclusion

Powers recognizes that plant-blind humans often struggle to truly perceive the presence of trees around them. Even when they see and identify them, it remains difficult to grasp their significance and enduring presence when compared to the fleeting nature of human life. He writes: "Four billion years of evolution, and that's where the matter will end. Politically, practically, emotionally, intellectually: Humans are all that count, the final word. You

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cannot shut down human hunger. You cannot even slow it. Just holding steady costs more than the race can afford" (598). The novel challenges the hierarchical understanding of placing plants at the lowest level of living creatures. Powers attacks the anthropocentric worldview, which harms and marginalizes trees. He offers a biocentric perception as opposed to a human-centered one.

The novel illustrates the interdependence of humans and trees. Nine characters in the novel reflect diverse historical experiences, varying ecological awareness, and distinct personal stories. However, they are all somehow related to particular trees in their lives, and all unite at the end of the novel to pursue a tree-conscious life dedicated to respecting and protecting them. Birgit Spengler says that: "Powers's panorama of characters thus represents a myriad of ways of response-ability to and of becoming entangled with trees: by approaching them on a scientific, artistic, or spiritual level, through activism and legal discourse, by climbing onto, falling into, walking among, or surrounding oneself with trees" (Spengler 2019, 86).

Secondly, the novel invites readers to see trees as more than resources—they are portrayed as essential to the broader ecosystem and human survival. Novel calls for a more holistic understanding of life on Earth. *The Overstory* de-centers human exceptionalism and places the vitality of trees in the center of its story. In all the stories, Powers not only places trees as interdependent with humans, but also fictionalizes trees as invaluable for the ecosystem.

Trees in the novel possess specific characteristics, such as agency, communication skills, and a lifespan, just like human beings. The novel is a response to the marginalization of trees, portraying their resilience and power. Powers use anthropomorphic depictions to alter people's perceptions of trees and their place in the ecosystem. Their portrayal as agents and characters in the novel is a challenge to traditional anthropocentric thinking.

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