



Arboreal Agency and the Decentering of the Human: Posthuman Ethics in Richard Powers' The Overstory

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Paper Info

Abstract

The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers emerges during an era of profound ecological crisis, utilizing the lives of arboreal beings to anchor its narrative. This paper argues that the novel constructs a complex posthuman ethical system by portraying trees not as passive symbols, but as agentic, sentient, and social beings. Through qualitative expository thematic analysis, this study identifies nine core themes—including vegetal subjectivity, mycorrhizal networks as distributed agency, and multispecies sympoiesis—which serve to decenter the human. This framework is grounded in the posthumanist philosophies of Donna Haraway and Michael Marder, the forest ecology research of Suzanne Simard, and the ecological criticism of Rob Nixon and Thom van Dooren. Powers suggests that by integrating human narrative into the deep time of forests, ethical responsibility is reframed: it shifts from an individualized human action to a shared "response-ability" within a more-than-human community. Ultimately, this paper

Keywords

*post human ethics,
arboreal agency, the
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concludes that *The Overstory* serves as a vital literary experiment for ethical living in the Anthropocene, advocating for a mode of existence characterized by listening, recognition, and an unending response to the complex world of which we are a part.

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1. Introduction

The Overstory (2018) by Richard Powers was released at a time when the ecological crisis is acute, prompting the humanities to urgently re-examine the relationship between the human and the more-than-human world. The novel's publication coincides with what Chakrabarty (2009) describes as a fundamental challenge to historical thinking: the recognition that humans have become geological actors capable of altering planetary systems for millennia. In this sense, Powers' arboreal epic—spanning generations and continents while weaving together the lives of nine human characters with those of trees—is a literary speculation on the potential decentering of the human and the ethical and intellectual significance of vegetal life.

The structure of *The Overstory* serves as an interpretive framework that enacts the very decentering it thematizes. By organizing the narrative into four sections—Roots, Trunk, Crown, and Seeds—Powers imposes an arboreal morphology upon the literary form, signaling that the novel's logic is derived from tree biology rather than human-centered linear progression. This structural choice functions as an interpretive key: it forces a departure from traditional anthropocentric teleology, wherein progress is measured by human achievement, toward a rhythmic, cyclical temporality that aligns with the lifespan and "slow" agency of trees. Consequently, the structure transforms the trees from mere backdrop or static symbol into dynamic characters that possess their own modes of intentionality, communication, and socialization. Through this lens, the chestnut captured by Nicholas Hoel's ancestor, the redwoods defended by Olivia Vandergriff, and the mycorrhizal networks studied by Patricia Westerford are not merely environmental subjects but structural pillars of the narrative. This morphological alignment

compels the reader to perform a posthumanist recalibration of action, agency, and subjectivity, challenging the assumption that only the human subject is worthy of primary ethical concern.

The paper is about *Overstory* and the posthumanics, a philosophical theory that challenges the anthropocentrism of the Western philosophy and tries to expand the ethical concern beyond check is based on the work of other writers such as Haraway (2016), who argues in support of making kin with nonhuman other, and Marder (2013), who formulates a theory of plant-thinking, to discuss how Powers is creating a vision of ethical relationality that includes trees as participants. The novel's depiction of decentralized, collective agency—as opposed to individualized, anthropocentric models—is further illuminated by Lambert's (2021) concept of 'mycorrhizal multiplicities,' which provides a theoretical lens for understanding the interdependent nature of the characters' actions.

The research is based on the qualitative approach of expository thematic analysis, which defines and clarifies nine themes that are intertwined to describe the posthuman ethical framework presented in the novel. These themes are formulated through a close reading of the novel in conversation with the theoretical and critical materials described. The scope of this analysis is defined by the provided references, thereby ensuring that the interpretive framework is informed by the most relevant scholarly perspectives on Powers' narrative project. This background may be elaborated further to provide a more theoretical background and a more detailed map of the academic discourse that the paper will enter. After the first paragraph of the current introduction that will introduce the setting of the novel during an ecological crisis, the following paragraphs will be put.

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This is the crisis that Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) refers to as the loss of the distinction between natural and human history, which demands new modes of narration. Once humanity has become a geological power, we must radically rewrite our histories to consider the agency of the nonhuman systems that act upon us and determine our fate. *The Overstory* responds to this call through an ecological narrative form. It moves beyond a simple account of human intervention in nature to explore the network of relations, communications, and agencies that constitute a forest.

In doing so, the novel aligns with a burgeoning trend in posthumanist philosophy that seeks to deconstruct the anthropocentric paradigm dominating Western thought. Here, "the posthuman" does not indicate human transcendence, but rather the re-establishment of the human as part of a more-than-human community of actors.

The engagement with vegetation in the novel places it within the rapidly growing field of "critical plant studies," a discipline highly influenced by philosophers like Michael Marder (2013). To understand how Powers avoids the traps of either silencing vegetal life or anthropomorphizing it, Marder's concept of "plant-thinking" is essential. Marder (2013) posits that the non-cognitive, non-ideal, and non-representational mode of existence characteristic of plants is a legitimate form of being-in-the-world. *The Overstory* applies this philosophy, portraying trees not as metaphors for human interests but as beings possessing inherent modes of perception and sociality. Powers translates this philosophical observation into literary practice, exploring the "language" of trees and the potential conflicts between arboreal and human consciousness. The novel thus serves as an experiment in Marder's thought, testing whether literature can bridge the gap between human and vegetal worlds without erasing the profound differences between them.

Such exploration of vegetal subjectivity is firmly grounded in the scientific studies of forest ecologists like Suzanne Simard (2018). The empirical basis of the major metaphor of the novel of mycorrhizal networks is the original research of Simard on mycorrhizal networks. Her discovery that trees talk, share resources, and even recognize kin by huge subterranean webs of fungi altered the scientific understanding of forests, and the paradigm shifted to that of a group of independent competitors to a complex and cooperative group. Simard (2018) claims that these networks participate in communication, tree learning, and tree memory (p. 191). It is a scientific fact that Powers imparts into the very substance and fabric of his story. The human characters in the novel, which seem to be quite different and unrelated to each other, gradually begin to connect with each other in a way that is somehow similar to how the roots of trees are connected.

Their collective agency, particularly in the novel's second half, relies not on individual heroism, but on a networked, collaborative response reminiscent of the mycorrhizal relations that

sustain the forest. Lambert (2021) describes this literary technique as "mycorrhizal multiplicity," a term defining the distributed, rhizomatic agency that the novel realizes through its formal strategies (p. 188). Lambert's article, which draws on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), is essential to understanding the vision of collective action Powers creates—one that is fundamentally environmental rather than political.

By pre-empting these scientific and philosophical understandings of arboreal life, *The Overstory* addresses the ethical dimensions of environmental destruction as conceptualized by Rob Nixon (2011). Nixon describes "slow violence" as a process of gradual, attritional destruction that occurs over time and in space, often invisible to the public eye (2011, p. 2). The deep time spanned by the novel—stretching across generations and geological epochs—is ideally suited to bringing this violence into focus. The blight of the American chestnut, the harvesting of old-growth redwoods, and the cumulative effects of climate change are not isolated catastrophes with sharp beginnings and ends, but manifestations of slow, prolonged disentanglement. Powers forces his readers to confront this gradual violence, sharing its weight between the lives of his human characters and the trees, whose lifespans far exceed our own. This spectatorship invites a form of ecological mourning, a subject explored by Thom van Dooren (2014) regarding extinction. Van Dooren (2014) argues that extinction is not merely the disappearance of a species, but a failure of a lifestyle and the erosion of a "livelihood of possibilities" to flourish (p. 10). This grieving is precisely what the activists in the novel experience when observing the destruction of ancient redwoods—a lamentation for a unique form of life and the myriad stories the tree symbolizes.

This experience of loss leads to a redefinition of community and ethical responsibility. The works of Donna Haraway (2016) and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) provide essential frameworks here. Haraway's concept of "sympoiesis," or "making-with," critiques the notion of self-contained, autonomous beings, positing that nothing is "self-made" and that we are all results of ongoing entanglements (2016, p. 58). *The Overstory* acts as a powerful literary demonstration of sympoiesis, showing how human lives are profoundly shaped by relations with trees and how those trees exist within a sympoietic community including fungi, insects, and other forest residents. Tsing's (2015) notion of "multispecies assemblages" further develops this.

In her study of matsutake mushrooms, Tsing (2015) describes how diverse creatures—human foragers, pine trees, and fungi—are brought into "precarious alliances" that allow life to flourish in unsuitable places, arguing that we are all "contaminated" by one another and that purity is not a viable choice (p. 27). The redwood canopies where activists reside, the landscapes of fire-scarred earth where new life emerges, and the laboratories where scientists study arboreal communication serve as meeting places where human and nonhuman paths converge, creating new possibilities and responsibilities.

Finally, *The Overstory* proposes an ethical vision based on deep entanglement and the "response-ability" it generates. For Haraway (2016), response-ability is not a duty enforced by abstract moral rules, but an ability arising from our relationships—the capacity to respond to the calls of those with whom we are entangled. This principle grounds the novel; characters are compelled to respond to the arboreal world through scientific research, direct action, artistic creation, or simple presence. Such appeals to response are not without tensions. The novel's extreme anti-anthropocentrism and its desire to view the world through the eyes of trees risks veering into political desperation, where the only reasonable response for humans is to "stand back," as suggested by Schryer (2025).

This criticism warrants closer reading, acknowledging the limitations of even the most well-intentioned attempts to decenter the human. The challenge lies in maintaining the novel's radical vision of arboreal agency in positive tension with the fact that it is humans, from our inevitably partial perspective, who must assume the task of ethical and political response. This paper will negotiate this tension, arguing that *The Overstory* remains a powerful interrogation of how to live ethically in the Anthropocene, not because it provides a definitive answer, but because it forcefully poses the question, thereby changing the terms in which that question can be asked.

2. Methods and Materials

This study employs expository thematic analysis, a qualitative method particularly applicable to literary research, as it enables the identification, analysis, and interpretation of

meaning patterns within complex narrative texts. As an expository mode, the research focuses on explanations and interpretations that illuminate the ethical and philosophical implications of the novel's central themes.

The primary source is *The Overstory* by Richard Powers (2018), which is analyzed through close reading. Secondary sources are restricted to the provided references, which encompass literature on posthumanist philosophy, ecological philosophy, plant studies, and literary criticism. These sources are cited in-text as needed.

The theoretical framework is founded on several significant thinkers: Haraway (2016) provides the framework for "making kin" and "staying with the trouble" regarding human-species entanglement; Marder (2013) offers the concept of "plant-thinking" to analyze vegetal subjectivity without resorting to anthropomorphism; Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Lambert (2021) provide the prism of the "rhizome" and "multiplicities" to analyze distributed agency; Tsing (2015) informs the analysis of multispecies assemblages and the future of life in capitalist ruins; and Simard (2018) provides the empirical foundation for arboreal communication and collective agency.

The analysis is done as follows. To start with, the novel is read with an attentiveness to the passages in which trees are discussed as agentic, sentient, or socially related beings. Second, these passages are coded according to emergent themes and how these passages establish relationships between human and arboreal characters, in particular. Third, the themes are considered in terms of the theoretical and critical sources, and their implication on posthuman ethics are revealed. Finally, the themes are organized into a logical argument on the ethical vision of the novel.

The nine themes which this process has been able to identify are: (1) vegetal subjectivity and plant-thinking; (2) mycorrhizal networks and distributed agency; (3) temporal dissonance and deep time; (4) slow violence and ecological mourning; (5) multispecies assemblages and sympoiesis; (6) the deconstruction of anthropocentric language; (7) enlightenment as shared enterprise; (8) witnessing and response-ability; and (9) the limits of anti-anthropocentrism. Each theme is developed in the section of findings with the help of textual evidence, which is discussed in dialogue with the sources identified.

3. Findings and Results

Theme 1: Vegetal Subjectivity and Plant-Thinking

The Overstory encourages a radical vegetal subjectivity, framing trees not as passive objects or background elements, but as subjects with their own internal experiences and intentionality. This resonates with Marder's (2013) philosophy of "plant-thinking," which asserts that vegetal life constitutes a real, albeit non-conscious and non-representational, form of being-in-the-world (p. 10). Powers translates this insight into narrative form.

The novel opens with Mimi Ma speaking to a pine "before words" (2018, p. 3), an initiation that transforms trees into communicative beings whose sociality exists outside the framework of human language. This theme is explored most comprehensively through Patricia Westerford, a scientist who studies tree language. Despite initial professional scorn, Westerford discovers that trees communicate through underground fungal networks, warn each other of danger, and recognize kin. Her realization—"There are no people. Even distinct species are not available. Everything in the forest is the forest" (2018, p. 142)—challenges the individualism foundational to Western moral philosophy. When trees are nodes in a distributed network rather than individuals, traditional ethical theories focused on individual rights may no longer apply. Powers' depiction of trees as subjects, however radically different from human subjects, compels readers to extend their moral imagination.

The violence of denying vegetal subjectivity is also dramatized. Deforestation, the felling of mature trees, and the reduction of living beings to board feet are predicated on a worldview that acknowledges tree utility but denies interiority. Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence" illuminates this, as forest destruction is a time-based, generational process. The ethical imperative *The Overstory* posits is, in part, the imperative to see trees differently—to recognize what Marder (2013) calls the "other of the human" that demands ethical consideration.

Theme 2: Mycorrhizal Networks and Distributed Agency

The chapter of Lambert (2021) called "Mycorrhizal Multiplicities: Mapping Collective Agency in *The Overstory* by Richard Powers" provides a key paradigm according to which the novel can be viewed as an illustration of agency as distributed and collective rather than individual and human-centered. According to the concept of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) on multiplicities,

Lambert asserts that Powers develops a vision of agency that is mycorrhizal, or, in other words, networked, rhizomatic, and indefinite in terms of a single source.

The scientific basis for this is Simard's (2018) research on mycorrhizal networks, which demonstrates that trees communicate, learn, and recall (p. 191). Forests are communities of interrelated beings rather than collectives of competing individuals. Powers translates this into a "polyvocal narration," utilizing fractured chapter divisions and repetitive structures (Lambert, 2021, p. 188). These techniques connect the nine human protagonists in ways that mirror the subterranean interrelations of trees. Just as a forest is a distributed intelligence without a center, the novel's human characters are increasingly caught in patterns they cannot control.

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This representation of agency complicates traditional morality. If agency is a product of a network rather than a conscious individual choice, the basis of individual ethical responsibility shifts. Haraway (2016) argues that we are "already entangled" with others in ways that are inherently unpredictable. *The Overstory* illustrates this through its depiction of environmental activism: the characters attempting to save the redwoods are not autonomous agents, but part of a larger movement that, like the forest itself, possesses "intentions" (Powers, 2018, p. 455) that the activists themselves cannot fully articulate or grasp.

Theme 3: Temporal Dissonance and Deep Tim

The Overstory is deeply concerned with "deep time"—the expansive timescale of trees. The chestnut tree photographed by generations of the Hoel family and the redwoods guarded by activists exist on scales that dwarf human history.

This is one of the aspects of the novel that is illuminated by the way Chakrabarty (2009) interprets the Anthropocene. Chakrabarty proposes that climate change has shattered the boundary between human history and natural history and that human beings are now seen as geological agents operating on planetary time scales. In his view, he writes: The current crisis has been a display of the collapse of the ancient humanist separation between natural history and human history (Chakrabarty 2009, 201). *The Overstory* implementation of this collapse is by the interweaving of human stories with the arboreal stories that evolve throughout centuries.

In this instance, dissonance is conveyed through the novel's structure. The four sections, Roots, Trunk, Crown, and Seeds, are superimposed on the life cycle of a tree, but these sections are also the stories of human beings, which means that the human is just a part of the bigger arboreal sequences. When the last member of his family in the novel, Nicholas Hoel, creates a land art installation of the word STILL using dead logs, he participates in a time structure that transcends his own time. The message will be abandoned, and smoldering slowly, until the logs are exhausted--a time perhaps as long as the history of human civilization itself.

This historical perspective forms a special moral stance. In the case when the timescales of the trees are many times longer than our own, then our duties towards them cannot be imagined in terms of immediate consequences or short-term outcomes. Deforestation is a gradual violence (Nixon 2011) which is intergenerational, and the process of rebuilding forests requires patience, which is not within the lifespan of a single human being. *The Overstory* is a novel that demands its audience to learn this patience, to think outside the time constraints that tend to enclose human decision-making.

Theme 4: Slow Violence and Ecological Mourning

The concept of slow violence by Nixon (2011) provides a necessary plan for the ecological devastation depicted in the novel. Nixon states that slow violence is a form of violence, which occurs over space and time, a violence of delayed destruction, diffused violence that is spread over time and space, and attritional violence that is not usually thought of as violence at all (Nixon

2011, 2). One such form of violence is the destruction of forests: it is a process that takes decades and centuries, it is not dramatic, and it is hardly ever viewed as a crisis.

The Overstory focuses on this slow violence through the collective effects of deforestation. The American chestnut, a mighty tree in the eastern woods, is now reduced to a few sprouts by a blight that was brought by the Asians. The redwoods, which were prehistoric and had existed for thousands of years, were cut down in a few minutes using chainsaws. These losses are not temporary but mechanisms, and the long period of the novel provides the reader with a chance to realize how much such losses can be.

Van Dooren (2014) also elaborates on this theme in his article about extinction and mourning. Van Dooren is convinced in *Flight Ways* that extinction is not merely a loss of a species but a breakdown of relations, narratives, and ways of being. According to him, the state of living in the world of extinction is to become involved in the death of a way of living, the disentwining of the future of prosperity (van Dooren 2014, 10). *The Overstory* uses this lesson to be applied to trees, representing the extinction of forests as the disintegration of multispecies communities that have been evolving over millennia.

The theme of inter-species grieving is also central. Activists do not mourn only for human losses, but for the trees and the animals displaced by their destruction. This grief serves as an adequate response to slow violence, a recognition that violence has occurred even in the absence of a visible aggressor or a single melodramatic event.

Theme 5: Multispecies Assemblages and Sympoiesis

A concept of sympoiesis, or making-with, proposed by Haraway (2016) provides a highly fruitful context to the analysis of the interactions between human beings and trees in the novel. Haraway claims that sympoiesis is a banal word; it means making-with. Nor is anything self-making, or autopoietic or self-organizing in any sense (Haraway 2016, 58). *The Overstory* engages this realization through its presentation of the inevitability of human lives being intertwined with the lives of arboreal beings, how humans and trees co-create.

The characters are all defined by their formative relationships with trees: Mimi Ma's solace in a pine, Nicholas Hoel's family chestnut, Douglas Pavlicek's survival through a banyan tree, and Neelay Mehta's vision of virtual worlds inspired by oaks. These are instances of what Tsing (2015) calls "multispecies assemblages"—collections of beings that irrevocably shape one another's trajectories. Tsing (2015) argues that "we are all contaminated by each other... purity is not a choice" (p. 27). The novel extends this to the entire forest, showing how trees, fungi, insects, birds, and humans constitute one another in ways that defy independence or purity.

In this instance, the work of Tsing is particularly topical. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, she explains the assemblage formed by matsutake mushrooms, pine trees, and human foragers to enable people to live in the ruins of capitalism. She says: we are all contaminated by each other. Every one of us has a history of contamination; we cannot but be pure (Tsing 2015, 27). *The Overstory* extends this observation to forests and shows how the trees, fungi, insects, birds, and people constitute each other in such a way that cannot be said to be pure or independent.

The sympoietic sense is also expressed in the description of the redwood protests in the novel. Those activists who spend months of their life in the trees are not just safeguarding the forest as a foreigner; they are becoming a part of the forest and learning to move, sleep, and live in arboreal space. The canopy life becomes accustomed to their bodies; their senses are transformed because they learn to see through the eyes of trees. It is sympoiesis in action: the formation of new life through the cross-species entanglement.

Theme 6: The Deconstruction of Anthropocentric Language

The language problem is one of the primary problems of any post-humanist literature: how to speak about nonhuman creatures without reducing them to human categories and structures? *The Overstory* deals with this challenge directly and experiments with narrative forms that suggest arboreal modes of communication without acknowledging the impossibility of fully escaping anthropomorphism.

Marder's (2013) "plant-thinking"—a non-cognitive, non-representational mode of existence—informs the novel's approach. Narrative devices used by Powers attempt to approach

this mode of thinking without claiming to represent it directly. The novel emphasizes that trees communicate through chemical signals, root grafts, and fungal networks—modes entirely alien to human language. When Patricia Westerford writes about trees "talking," she uses quotation marks to acknowledge the metaphorical necessity of the term. Yet, the novel maintains that trees *do* communicate and constitute a social world, even if they lack mechanical, stimulus-response reactivity.

The struggle between figurative and literal language is persistent. Trees speak "pre-word" language (Powers, 2018, p. 3); they have "silent and invisible" words (Lambert, 2021, p. 189); they possess intentions humans can recognize (Powers, 2018, p. 455). According to Lambert (2021), this ambiguity is productive: by refusing to clarify whether trees are "speaking" or "thinking" in human terms, Powers compels readers to confront the constraints of human language and the reality of nonhuman otherness.

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Theme 7: Enlightenment as Shared Enterprise

"Enlightenment as a shared enterprise," as discussed by Ostalska (2022), illuminates one of the novel's most philosophically ambitious concepts: the reimagining of enlightenment beyond the framework of European modernity. The novel integrates Buddhist concepts of enlightenment—as an awakening to interrelatedness—with critical reactions to the Western Enlightenment project.

This is even coded in the title of the novel. The top of the forest, the stratum where the trees seek light, is referred to as the overstory. However, it is also a narrative term, meaning that it has an angle that considers a sequence of stories. The enlightenment that *The Overstory* proposes is

not the personal victory of personal reason but the common awakening to the more-than-human world. Enlightenment is a group process, which one of the characters believes: (Powers 2018, 504).

This vision challenges the historical Enlightenment, which, as Ostalska (2022) notes, was marked by systemic exclusions (p. 309). The historical Enlightenment's glorification of reason often coincided with the devaluation of nature and the instrumentalization of the nonhuman. *The Overstory* proposes an alternative enlightenment: one found in listening to trees, recognizing our entanglement with other species, and accepting our role as components of ecological communities. The novel demands that this enlightenment be put into practice—an "active enlightenment" embodied by activists who risk their lives to protect the redwoods.

The novel further engages with Buddhist philosophy, particularly in its depiction of the forest as a community of interdependent beings—a conceptualization mirrored in the insights of the scientist Patricia Westerford. The Buddhist tenets of interdependence, the doctrine of non-self (*anatta*), and compassion for all sentient beings resonate profoundly with the novel's ecological vision. However, *The Overstory* insists that such enlightenment must transcend theoretical abstraction and be manifested in praxis. This 'active enlightenment'—embodied, tangible, and perilous—is exemplified by the activists who risk their lives to defend the redwoods, thereby transforming philosophical realization into urgent, physical intervention.

Theme 8: Witnessing and Response-ability

The concept of response-ability, the capacity to respond, which is also a duty to respond, suggested by Haraway (2016) may be applied to understand the moral demands that *The Overstory* puts on its characters and readers. The characters are called upon all through the novel to observe the devastation of forests, and to respond to the awareness of their incongruence with arboreal others.

The structure of the novel does this, witnessing demand. The novel combines several stories across generations and introduces the trends of destruction and response that would otherwise remain unseen. The chestnut blight, the logging of old-growth forests, the neglect of native fire

management practices- all these things are working on time scales that no individual can see, but the polyvocal narration of the novel does reveal them to us.

The characters that respond to these processes respond in different ways. Patricia Wester Ford responds with scientific research, and she has made a career to study the communication of trees and the advocacy of forest conservation. The activists respond by direct action, where they put their lives in danger to protect ancient trees. Nicholas Hoel attempts to respond to it by creating paintings that bear witness to loss and survival. All these reactions are partial, incomplete, inadequate, but necessary.

The article by van Dooren (2014) about extinction and ethical response illuminates on what is being staked in this theme. He says: Extinction is a hideous teacher of morals. It makes us face the gravity of loss and the inability of any significant response" (van Dooren 2014, 12). The *Overstory* has no easy solutions for how to respond to the ecological crisis. Instead, it provides a range of responses that have their own limitations and possibilities and poses for the readers to consider what responsibility might mean in their lives.

Theme 9: The Limits of Anti-Anthropocentrism

"The posthumanist project of *The Overstory* necessitates critical complication, a task undertaken by Schryer (2025), who identifies inherent contradictions in the novel's depiction of arboreal agency and human responsibility. Beyond merely celebrating the novel's radical anti-anthropocentrism, Schryer argues that the text struggles with the 'immanence of the human view'—the persistent, unavoidable reality that any attempt to represent a nonhuman perspective is inevitably filtered through human cognitive and linguistic frameworks. This creates a fundamental paradox: while the novel strives to decenter the human subject, it remains reliant on human characters, human language, and human activism to articulate its ethical demands. Consequently, Schryer (2025) suggests that by positioning trees as possessing an agency that is almost entirely alien to human understanding, the novel risks rendering human political action futile, potentially fostering a form of passive despair rather than empowering readers to act within the ruined landscapes of the Anthropocene. Thus, the novel's brilliance lies not in resolving these tensions,

but in its capacity to expose the limits of human culpability and the inherent difficulty of advocating for a world that refuses to conform to human-centered logic."

The novel's attempt to adopt a 'tree ontology'—a perspective that seeks to perceive the world through the temporal and sensory register of trees—may be interpreted as a retreat into abstraction when confronted with the overwhelming reality of climate change and mass extinction. This ontological shift risks devaluing human agency; by intimating that the most ethically 'desirable' stance is for human beings to effectively cease being the primary architects of the world, the novel may inadvertently adopt a non-committal position regarding tangible political mobilization. From this critical vantage point, the prioritization of arboreal existence over human intervention creates a strategic vacuum. Because trees cannot serve as proxies for human ethical and political decision-making, the novel's radical anti-anthropocentrism potentially complicates the necessity for collective human action in a ruined world.

This tension runs through the novel. On one hand, *The Overstory* insists on the intrinsic value of trees and their right to exist independently of human interests. On the other hand, the novel is addressed to humans, seeks to move human readers, and depends on human action to achieve its conservationist aims. The paradox is inescapable: any call to decenter the human is itself a human production, addressed to humans, advocating for human response.

This paradox remains throughout: *The Overstory* insists on the intrinsic value of trees independently of human interests, yet it is written for human readers and depends on human action to achieve its conservationist aims. The paradox is inescapable: any call to decenter the human is, itself, a human production. This tension is mirrored in Leopold's (1949) "land ethic," which defines right action as that which upholds the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community (pp. 224-225). Leopold does not assume human extinction, but rather an expansion of the human community to include nonhuman others. *The Overstory* encourages this expansion, while acknowledging its difficulty and imperfection.

4. Future Research Directions and Recommendations

The Overstory has an arboreal agency and posthuman ethics analysis that generates several research directions in the future. Firstly, the comparative analysis may be carried out regarding the way the novel of Powers may be compared to other modern fiction works addressing the problem of plant life and vegetal agency. Such comparisons would be provided with a methodological framework by Taylor's (2016) work on the representation of environmental phenomena in literature, although Taylor would have to expand the scope of his work (plant life) to atmospheric phenomena.

Second, the intersection of science and literature is an interesting subject to research. The article by Simard (2018) about mycorrhizal networks has been the center of attention of the scientific background of *The Overstory*, and the way other scientific developments are taken up into contemporary literature, like plant neurobiology, forest ecology, or climate science, can be the subject of future studies. Such interdisciplinary investigation is particularly promising for the work of Gagliano (2018) on plant behavior and learning.

Third, the issue of the ethicality of the nonhuman agency representation remains to be addressed further philosophically. Plant-thinking by Marder (2013) and sympoiesis by Haraway (2016) are a point of departure, but future research can develop them or bring them to other moral traditions. The deep ecology by Naess (1989) is an example of such a distinctive way of approaching the intrinsic value of nonhuman life, and although it is attractive to *The Overstory*, it is also quite like it.

Fourth, post-humanist literature and politics should be given greater attention. The concept of ecological thought presented by Morton (2010) dwells on interconnectedness and has been criticized as politically ambiguous. Future research might examine how *The Overstory* strikes a balance between entanglement awareness and the call to political action between the critique of anthropocentrism and the mobilization of human beings.

And finally, pedagogical use of *The Overstory* should be discussed. The ready accessibility, the emotionalism of the novel and the philosophical profundity are what make it a fine instrument

to be employed in numerous contexts when teaching literature, environmental studies courses, ethics classes. The interaction of students with post-humanist themes of the novel and the impact of reading *The Overstory* on environmental attitudes or behaviors could be studied.

5. Conclusion

The Overstory by Richard Powers is an essential posthumanist text—a deep reflection on arboreal agency that seeks to decenter the human. The novel prompts readers to expand their moral imagination by portraying trees as sentient, social, and agentic beings, thereby recognizing our participation in a more-than-human world.

The posthuman ethical framework expressed in these nine themes identified in this analysis, which are vegetal subjectivity and plant-thinking, mycorrhizal networks and distributed agency, temporal dissonance and deep time, slow violence and ecological mourning, multispecies assemblages and sympoiesis, the deconstruction of anthropocentric language, enlightenment as shared enterprise, witnessing and response-ability, and the limits of anti-anthropocentrism, are ambitious and self-critical. The novel requires nonhuman agency but acknowledges that it is difficult to depict it; it requires human action to the ecological crisis but acknowledges that such action can never be adequate to the degree of loss.

This analysis has drawn upon essential theoretical resources to illuminate Powers' project: Haraway's (2016) sympoiesis helps us realize how humans and trees create one another; Marder (2013) provides the vocabulary for plant-thinking; Nixon's (2011) "slow violence" reveals the gradual eradication of life recorded in the novel; Tsing's (2015) "multispecies assemblages" encapsulates the confounding nature of human and nonhuman lives; Lambert's (2021) "mycorrhizal multiplicities" maps the novel's distributed agency; Simard's (2018) empirical research grounds the narrative in reality; and Chakrabarty's (2009) analysis of the Anthropocene contextualizes the novel's temporal imagination.

The Overstory does not offer simple conclusions; rather, it offers insight into living ethically in a fractured world. It suggests that ethical life begins by listening to the trees and the voices of the more-than-human world surrounding us. It continues with the realization that we are

not isolated but fundamentally related to other beings. It culminates in a "speaking-back"—an incomplete, inadequate, but ultimately necessary response. In the age of ecological crisis, such listening, recognition, and response may be our most important tasks.

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المستخلص

تأتي رواية "الأشجار العظيمة" (2018) لريتشارد باورز، الحائزة على جائزة بوليتزر، في وقت يواجه فيه البشر أزمة بيئية هائلة، إذ تستخدم الرواية حياة الكائنات الشجرية كأداة رئيسية في سرد القصة. تُطرح في هذه الورقة فكرة أن الرواية تُطوّر نظاماً أخلاقياً معقداً لما بعد الإنسانية من خلال تصوير الأشجار لا كرموز سلبية، بل ككائنات فاعلة وواعية واجتماعية. كشف التحليل الموضوعي الذي اعتمده الدراسة، من خلال التحليل التفسيري النوعي، عن تسعة محاور رئيسية، منها الذاتية النباتية، وشبكات الفطريات الجذرية كفاعلية موزعة، والتكافل بين الأنواع المتعددة، والتي تُسهم في إزاحة مركزية الإنسان. ويستند هذا التحليل إلى فلسفات ما بعد الإنسانية لدونا هاراواي ومايكل ماردر، والأدبيات العلمية حول بيئة الغابات لسوزان سيمارد، والنقد البيئي لروب نيكسون وتوم فان دورين. ويُشير باورز إلى أنه من خلال السرد الإنساني كجزء من التاريخ العميق للغابات، سنجبر المسؤولية الأخلاقية على التساؤل، وبدلاً من أن تكون فعلاً فردياً، سنتحول إلى شعور مشترك بالمسؤولية والاستجابة لدى مجتمع يتجاوز حدود البشر. وفي النهاية، تخلص الورقة البحثية إلى أن رواية "الأشجار العظيمة" تُعد تجربة أدبية جوهريّة حول ماهية العيش الأخلاقي في عصر الأنثروبوسين، وتوصي بنمط حياة يتسم بالإنصات والإدراك والاستجابة الدائمة للعالم المعقد الذي نُشكل جزءاً أساسياً منه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أخلاقيات ما بعد الإنسان، فاعلية الأشجار، الأشجار المهيمنة