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# “The tree is saying things in words before words”: form as theme in Richard Powers’ *The Overstory*

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Pia Masiero\*

**Abstract:** Richard Powers’ 2019 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Overstory*, is a very ambitious work which purports to raise the awareness on the life of trees proposing an eco-centered way of being revolving around the enlargement of the concepts of agency and creativity. This article focuses on the formal ways in which Powers has strived to give voice to the-other-than human. Specifically, it presents the structuring of the plot according to the extended metaphor of the tree and its rhetorical functioning according to the parabolic form. These macro principles are translated into two micro choices – the positing of a nonhuman narrator and the present as the dominant tense – that sustain and mirror the novel’s thematic concerns. The close readings of the existential trajectories of two female characters open up to a reflection on Powers’ gender politics.

Richard Powers’ 2019 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Overstory*, contains the ingredients that according to the foundational book by Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, “comprise an environmentally oriented work” (7), namely,

1. The nonhuman 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.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the texts’ ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (1995: 7-8)

No one would dispute that Powers’ book is the perfect candidate for an environmental reading and attends profoundly to Buell’s four ingredients; and yet Buell’s list does not take us far in understanding Powers’ contribution to environmental discourse. It is unquestionable that echoes of traditional American nature writing, from Henry David Thoreau to John Muir to Aldo Leopold, to name the

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\* Pia Masiero is Associate Professor of North American Literature at Ca’ Foscari, University of Venice. Her research interests include modernist and contemporary North American and Canadian literature and second-generation post-classical narratology. She is the author of *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books* (Cambria Press, 2011), *Names across the Color Line. William Faulkner’s Short Fiction 1931-1942* (LT2, 2012) and numerous articles on authors such as David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, Alice Munro, Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Bolaño.

most famous ones, are all over Powers' novel and the same can be said of more recent reflections on the life of trees and forests by biologists and botanists, the most notable example being Suzanne Simard's, the biologist who authored *The Hidden Life of Trees* and who is the explicit model for Patricia Westerford, one of the central characters of the novel. Powers enters this conversation thoroughly and joins him in "attempting to imagine a more 'ecocentric' way of being" (Buell 1995: 1): his attempt is narrative in nature and as such I will treat it. Powers' novel responds to what Val Plumwood calls the "human-centredness syndrome" a condition which "includes the hyperseparation of humans as a special species and the reduction of non-humans to their usefulness to humans" (2009: n.p.). The features of the syndrome Plumwood speaks of are the themes Powers is interested in *as a novelist*. His contribution to environmental discourse, well beyond Buell's (and Simard's) take, thus, concerns eminently form and the inherent human-centeredness that prose fiction itself is predicated upon.

In the final section of her "Nature in the Active Voice" significantly titled "The Role of Writing", Plumwood argues: "The enriching, intentionalising and animating project I have championed is also a project that converges with much poetry and literature. It is a project of re-animating the world, and remaking ourselves as well" (2009: n.p.). Powers is definitely aligned with this project of re-animation: his most urgent challenge is finding ways to decentralize intentionality and guide readers to consider enlarging the concepts of agency and creativity (I am adapting Plumwood's words here) to include trees and forests:

He tells her how the word *beech* becomes the word *book*, in language after language. How *book* branched up of beech roots, way back in the parent tongue. How beech bark played host to the earliest Sanskrit letters. Patty pictures their tiny seed growing up to be covered with words (116)<sup>1</sup>.

How can a book with its words pay homage to the trees that gave it a name and its very body? How can a book with its stories tell one about a lineage that bespeaks an interdependence across species? How can a narrative represent what lives beyond and away from words?

Richard Powers' novel tries to answer these questions. In their turn, the pages that follow interpret Powers' answers, specifically, the formal and structural ways in which he has chosen to give linguistic shape to what is out there but is still – essentially – invisible, what we may call the nonhuman (Richard Grusin 2015), or the other-than-human (Freya Mathews 2008). In so doing this article wishes to contribute to the work that "remains to be done to marry ecocritical concerns and discussions on literary and narrative form" (Caracciolo 2019: 272).

In the first part of *The Great Derangement, Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, titled "Stories", Amitav Ghosh reflects on the fact that the contemporary novel seems unable to address the issue of climate change; "throughout history [poetry, art ... prose fiction] have responded to war, ecological calamity, and crises of many sorts: why then should climate change prove so peculiarly resistant to their practices?" (Ghosh 2016: 10). Broadly speaking – Ghosh argues – the reason is "a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (9) which fails to negotiate "the currents of

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all the pages in parentheses refer to *The Overstory*.

global warming” (8) and, more specifically, the reason concerns a matter of scale belittling the relevance of an individual’s (or a group of individuals’) existence, which is, typically, at the center of the novel. Powers’ book may be said to belong to climate-change fiction only tangentially (deforestation is certainly one of the causes of climate change), but the negotiation its themes require can be easily related to Ghosh’s reflections as they depend on an other-than-human temporal scale and organizational principles.

Plot-wise, the overall trajectory of the novel builds climactically toward the defiant actions of a group of radical eco-activists who chain themselves to trees, tree-sit, organize activities of sabotage and arson to save the trees marked for felling. Not only do these activists (four of the nine protagonists) take an explicit stand in favor of trees, but all the lives of the other five non-activist characters are connected with trees. And yet it is not simply a matter of putting trees at the thematic center of his epic novel. In his preceding novel, *Orfeo* (2014), Powers had already reflected on bridging the gap between what has an invisible structure and what has a tangible form. There, Peter, a musician, devotes himself to finding ways to bestow an audibly recognizable sound on the invisible patterns of DNA. Here, the invisible system to be given a voice and a story is the life of trees and forests, materials which are, at first sight, narratively intractable. Well aware, along the lines Ghosh has traced, that the novel presents “peculiar forms of resistance” (Ghosh 2016: 9) – that is, a generically inherent recalcitrance to make room for what exceeds “the intermediate world of human perception” (Caracciolo 2019: 272) – Powers has chosen to circumvent this generic resistance and rejuvenate the potential of the novel to address eco-themes and more broadly the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, starting from the most basic ingredient of a novel, the plot. Powers knows that we read, to borrow Peter Brooks’ words, “for the plot”; he knows that plot responds to one of the readers’ most basic expectations: to read a story that has a globally structured configuration, that is, an ordering that gives it shape through a beginning, a middle and an end (see Karin Kukkonen 2014). The climactic movement the book traces, which I have just sketched, attests to Powers’ desire to meet readerly expectations, and yet the way in which he shapes plot mirrors his most profound intentions. Following David Herman, I am employing the word intention here and in what follows as “a structure of know-how” that seeps into “narratively organized uses of language” (Herman 2008: 244, 245) in which intentional systems are grounded. I take a novel, thus, to be an intentional system “embodying structured sets of communicative [authorial] intentions” (Herman 2008: 246).

On the one hand, Powers structures the plot according to an extended metaphor that guarantees a macroscopic movement and ripples down in a myriad of microscopic ways; on the other, he models the novel’s trajectory on the parabolic form which itself, as we will see, depends on and is grafted onto the central extended metaphor. Metaphors and parables are both sites of rhetorical conversion that invite the reader/listener to change a perceptual and behavioral attitude; they have – potentially – an affective and existential objective: to alter a mode of living redirecting it toward a more authentic anthropological truth, in the case at hand, the existence of a world beyond human-centeredness revolving around “interspecies com-

munication” in which a new “dialogic concept of self for both the human and for others” may arise (Deborah Bird Rose 2013: 98) .

Starting from the paratextual materials, I will map the ways in which the reader is guided to envision the novel as a tree and thus consider the interrelations among its various parts as mirroring its structure. I will then show how this basic metaphor branches into two crucial formal choices concerning voice and tense and how they activate the parabolic form asking readers to progressively accept interpretive possibilities they had not prefigured through the engagement of their own embodied experience. The close readings of the existential trajectories of two female characters, Patricia Westerford and Dorothy Cazaly, will allow me to demonstrate how Powers has mobilized the metaphor and its formal branchings to touch upon affective changes that can produce the perceptual shift necessary to reanimate the world beyond and away from human-centeredness. These close readings will contextually enable me to consider how these changes may relate to gender-specific attitudes and predispositions.

In an article that I had the privilege to read in draft form, Shannon Lambert demonstrates convincingly that Powers structures his novel according to the pattern of the mycelium, a fungus that communicates with its fellows through a complex web of chemical networks. In her fascinating reading, Lambert interprets the representation of the interconnections among the novel’s characters as “largely rooted in analogy” (Lambert forthcoming: n.p.): she juxtaposes Powers’ narrative choices to the configurations and paths mycorrhizal collectives employ to connect across their distributed bodies thanks to functional signals. Keeping Lambert’s interpretation in mind, I propose here to explore what the book invites us to follow explicitly: the extended tree-metaphor. Whereas the mycelium analogy is not immediately evident and requires a certain amount of knowledge to start with, the tree analogy is offered to the reader starting from the paratext itself. This reader-friendly move is part and parcel of a larger strategy that lies at the core of the novel and that is clearly connected with the questions I started from: the bridging of what is anthropocentrically taken for granted and belongs to our culturally inflected interpretive habits (a book, the outer looks of a tree) and what needs to be understood about the non-human world of trees. I would argue that the bridging trajectory at work in the novel is, at its core, parabolic, in the biblical sense of the term: a parable has a narrative structure that brings listeners/readers to entertain unheard of concepts and truths only after having mobilized their already possessed knowledge of the world (see Pierre Prigent 2016 and Ruben Zimmermann 2011). As Adam Appich puts it: “You can’t see what you don’t understand. But what you think you already understand, you’ll fail to notice” (439).

The biblical form is devised to lead listeners to acknowledge that not only did they not know about the new truths the parable has revealed, but that they actually had only a partial and imperfect knowledge of what they thought they knew. I suggest that the tree analogy belongs to the parabolic first phase: the promise of a journey shaped on a reassuring (because known) path. The mycelium analogy would thus pertain to the second phase of the parabolic structure which will turn out to illuminate the rhizomatic working of the mycelium and the actual functioning of trees. The parable is hidden in plain sight: as soon as the reader opens the

book the path is explicitly foregrounded as the content page makes explicitly clear that the novel is modeled on the structure of a tree. The titles of the four parts “Roots”, “Trunk”, “Crown”, “Seeds” provide an extended metaphor that depicts the relationships among the sections as conjugated in terms of connection and growth and, implicitly, of circularity. The human factor – so to speak – belongs to the “Roots” part, the only one that contains titled subsections, each devoted to an individual character, or, in one instance, to a couple: Nicholas Hoel, Mimi Ma, Adam Appich, Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly, Douglas Pavlicek, Neelay Mehta, Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff. The title page and the epigraphs as well, are all aligned in putting trees at the center. In the former, the title is followed by a cross-section of a tree trunk, which, significantly, will return to mark the numerous subsections in part 2, “Trunk”; in the latter, three excerpts taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Lovelock and Bill Neidjie riff on the silently alive presence of trees.

In various interviews, Powers has explained how he himself has been struck by the tree analogy considering from a distance what he had written in the first still undivided section that initially contained all the stories of the nine protagonists reciprocally intertwined. Perceiving the overall movement of this section he then decided to make it more explicit and divided it into eight independent short stories, that constitute the narrative premises of what follows.

The analogy immediately begins to activate the parabolic movement just described: a juxtaposition between what we *already* know about trees and what we still do not know about the novel that provides us with a structural promise concerning the plot design. The analogy concerns a structural pattern pivoting on a two-fold movement: from (proximal) separation (roots in the plural) to a coming together (trunk and crown in the singular) to (distal) separation (seeds in the plural) predicated upon an intrinsically organized trajectory which maps both a linear development through time and a vaster circular pattern (seeds cannot but become in their turn roots and then trunks and crowns). The movement contains in itself a temporal dimension starting explicitly in the past (roots) and reaching out to the future (seeds): this structure invites us to read the “Trunk” and “Crown” sections as the present. It furthermore implies a development independent from human agency and belonging to a vaster organically designed temporal scale. In a very basic sense, the human – the nine protagonists – is contained in the nonhuman and should be read against that structuring principle, if we agree to attend to authorial intentions. Readers’ expectations are, thus, honored, but readers are immediately invited to accept circularity and not linearity as the principle that structures the plot.

The tree metaphor is complicated by the title of the book. According to the Merriam-Webster’s definition “overstory” means 1: the layer of foliage in a forest canopy 2: the trees contributing to an overstory. These two botanical meanings cannot but intersect with whatever meaning we may give to the adverb “over” when it is connected with the word story. I would argue that this very ambiguity, where “over” might refer to a story we need to stretch our senses to hear and thus might go unheeded or to a higher-order story that encompasses a lower order one, re-

quires us to suspend our attributing it a definite meaning – an exercise the novel invokes and suggests at every possible level.

When we eventually pass this paratextual threshold and enter the storyworld, we come across a two-page-long piece that functions as a sort of prologue setting the stage for what follows in many ways. Well in keeping with the general interconnected structure of the book, we will soon discover that each section presents such a preamble. “*First there was nothing. Then there was everything. Then, in a park above a western city after dusk, the air is raining messages. A woman sits on the ground, leaning against a pine*” (3, italics in the text). The opening is grandiose, vividly evoking the moment of creation par excellence, the first chapter of *The Book of Genesis* that details the transition from a formless and dark void to the created world. The prologue to the last section of the novel returns to this moment, detailing the stages of creation if it were scaled down to twenty-four hours: “*Say the planet is born at midnight and it runs for one day*” (475 italics in the text). The second “then” (“*then in a park*”) might be interpreted as taking place after the fast-forwarded phases of creation depicted in the final preamble or it might be describing what happens when everything changes because of our change as far as our willingness and capability of perception are concerned. Neither interpretation is, as yet, available textually: what is there for us to take in is the present tense, which zooms in on a specific moment, “tonight”, and the dance between italicized and normal font which is not easy to attribute. The scene centers on a woman and a pine. She sits on the ground leaning against the pine bark in a park in a western city at dusk. The indeterminate articles and the woman’s anonymity suggest a sense of representativeness. We will be able, by the end of the novel, to give this woman an identity, but here she remains nameless: the focus is on the kind of communication that takes place and not on a specific person. The pine says things “*in words before words*” and the woman listens, tuning down her ears “*to the lowest frequencies*” (3 italics in the text). It is a mystical moment in which a representative of a kind – the nonhuman – speaks to a representative of another kind – the human – in a complete reversal of typical roles. What the pine says and what other trees from farther away join in to reinforce concerns the bare essentials of the relationship between them – trees and humans – as it has developed through history: “All the ways you imagine us ... are always amputations. Your kind never sees us all. You miss the half of it, and more. There’s always as much belowground as above” (3). In a nutshell, the problem is a matter of perception, a species-specific blindness. Meaning does not reach the mind because the mind is fed by partial and distorted perception. This woman seems to be ready, her ears capable of catching the signals showered on her profusely, her mind slighter greener than is usually the case. This woman, thus, becomes the perfect and much-needed recipient of a new vision which requires a de-centering, a shedding of the role of the one who does the speaking. The deixis here employed paves the way for the reader’s own experiential engagement as the present tense and “tonight” concerns his/her own embodied existence as well (see William Hanks 2005: 99).

The prologue ends with a sentence whose far-reaching implications we might dismiss: “*The pine she leans against says: Listen. There’s something you need to hear*” (4 italics in the text). Literally speaking, it could be argued that the some-

thing the woman needs to hear is contained in what follows – the overstory. This interpretation would imply that at least the sections making up the “Roots” section could be narrated by the same voice which is saying things to the woman here, namely, the pine. This radical reading is certainly intriguing and would amount to the literal manifestation of Powers’ desire to give voice to trees he has articulated on various occasions. And yet, this is far from being a choice to be filed under the heading ‘magic realism’. To return to Ghosh’s reflections, we could actually argue that science fiction stands to climate fiction as magic realism stands to the intelligent life of trees. Both genres are an easy way to dismiss the import of the two themes and relegate them to extravaganzas not to be taken seriously. Away from easy-made generic tags, the novel goes to great lengths to teach its readers – mostly, as we will see, through one specific character, Patricia Westerford – that trees are far from being passive and isolated insentient beings. What trees know, and thus what this pine could know and report, belong to a collective interrelated network that may be easily translated, narratologically speaking, into diffuse knowledge, namely, omniscience. Positing a pine as the narrator of the “Roots” section is thus just the kind of choice that would literalize the debunking of human-centeredness and the consequent perceptual shift the novel takes a stance on. If we accept this invitation we are asked to enact a first important decentering move. It is highly likely we forget about this sentence and lapse into our usual interpretive moves that depend on the cognitive biases that guide our apprehension of so-called reality; but this too is part and parcel of the drama the novel stages.

Be this as it may, the reader is now presented with eight sections, each centered on the character that gives it his/her name. The “Roots” section is the necessary bridge that connects this side, the storylines of ordinary people, with the other, nonhuman side, the life of trees. Once this section has patiently invested in our engagement with recognizable situations and has rhetorically pitched the instabilities that forward the plot, we may be ready to listen and attend to lower frequencies and model the woman in the prologue.

These independent storylines present a crucial common denominator: the present tense, which, we soon discover, is the dominant tense of the novel. As the prologue describes what happens “tonight” in a park, the novel in its entirety centers on what happens now. Narratologically speaking, the employment of the present tense is a strategy that takes teleology away from the narrative when this latter is told by a homodiegetic narrator using the first-person pronoun (see James Phelan 1994). Here the effect is strikingly different: it is not simply a matter of not having the restricted perspective intrinsic in a first-person narrative situation, but of being immersed in a present which is somehow stretched to embrace the entire lives of the novel’s characters. This amplified present is not, therefore, the historical present, but rather the narrative counterpart of time looked at from the perspective of a tree. In a scene that shows us Nicholas, one of the activists, returning to the ghost of Mimas and camping on its stump after Olivia has died in action we read:

He lies on his side as night comes on, his head on a wadded jacket near the ring laid down the year Charlemagne died. Somewhere underneath his coccyx, Columbus. Past his ankles, the first Hoel leaves Norway for Brooklyn and the expanses of Iowa. Beyond the length of his body, crowding up to the cut’s cliff, are the rings of his own birth, the death of his family, the

roadside visit of the woman who recognized him, who taught him how to hang on and live (358).

Centuries are here condensed in the tree rings and Nicholas' own life is "beyond the length of his body", a wording which subtly stresses both the incommensurability of the time-spans of humans and trees and the potentiality of life to extend beyond one's body. The present tense thus becomes a consequence of the extended metaphor that structures the book and a reinforcement of the hypothesis of a tree as a narrator that the first prologue presented: the numerous narratorial interventions that punctuate the novel and connect characters across space and time could be easily read as the result of the diffuse knowledge trees are capable of. Teleology is thus recuperated not through retrospection but through the network of collaborative interdependence trees belong to:

Across the road where she's parked, aspens tumble down the basin toward Fish Lake, where five years earlier a Chinese refugee engineer took his three daughters camping.... Two hundred miles to the east, a student sculptor ... walks past the single quaking aspen and doesn't notice it.... In a St. Paul suburb not far from Lake Elmo, two aspens grow near the south wall of an intellectual property lawyer's house (131).

This employment of the present tense which is neither the simultaneous present nor the historical present, but the eternal present of trees is a further notch in the relativizing of human-centeredness the novel is striving to foster. Altering time implies altering the very notion of meaningfulness and relevance.

The formal choices described so far – the parabolic plot structure grafted onto the extended metaphor of the tree, the suggestion of a non-human narrating instance and the present tense – all strive to sustain the central themes of the novel, namely, the intelligent and communal life of trees and their relation with the human. Patricia Westerford and Dorothy Cazaly stand out among the nine protagonists: despite their differences, the two women read life and death according to the circular present-tense perspective of the arboreal world. At the same time, their affinity with nature raises the question of Powers' gender politics.

As is well known, the general concept around which ecofeminism has been defined and has developed concerns a critical reading that juxtaposes the exploitation of nature (and animals) by capitalism and the oppression of women by patriarchal societies. Capitalism and patriarchy have been read as joint ventures that have had similar results: the domination, marginalization and silencing of the other, be it the female other or the non-human other. As far back as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir had already begun to reflect along these lines – woman as other, woman as nature – in her *Le deuxième sexe*. As Greta Gaard argues,

Ecofeminism emerged from the intersections of feminist research and the various movements for social justice and environmental health, explorations that uncovered the linked oppressions of gender, ecology, race, species, and nation.... The domination of women and of nature have shared roots in the logic of science and capitalism, an intertwining of economics and rationalism. (2011:28; see also Gaard 1993).

Powers is not interested in endorsing this or that critical take, but I think he offers us a way to reflect on our interpretive moves past and beyond labels. Women, Powers seems implicitly to suggest, might be intrinsically slightly greener beings more readily apt to develop an ecological consciousness, but the book does not



seem to follow the usual ecofeminist path as it does not juxtapose the ample discourse of commodification of nature through a profit-oriented deforestation with the commodification of women and their mistreatment or objectification. Powers is not keen on addressing the notion of oppression in its manifold manifestations; he is instead targeting a more diffuse – I would even say universal – issue which, as we have seen, concerns perceptual awareness first and foremost.

Power's central female character, Patricia Westerford debunks a possible ecofeminist reading. Brought up by a caring father to pay attention to the natural world that surrounds her, she is able to see what he knows: "plants are willful and crafty and after something, just like people" (114). As a botanist, she devotes her entire life to trying to respond to what her father has told her: "We know so little about how trees grow. Almost nothing about how they bloom and branch and shed and heal themselves. We've learned a little about a few of them, in isolation. But nothing is less isolated or more social than a tree" (115). Plant-Patty becomes the Queen of Chlorophyll (120) and the scientist that leads the field into a Copernican change of consciousness that, starting from "that mind-boggling magic act" (124), namely, photosynthesis, guides her to discover how trees communicate with each other through signals and build an "airborne network, showing an immune system across acres of woodland" (126). Patricia is the character that allows Powers to expand more on the challenge to take the road so far not taken which passes through an honest assessment of what man has done in the name of taming the land according to his entrenched sense of superiority and mastery. And yet, everything Patricia stands for comes to her as a legacy of her father: we are explicitly told that she is the only one in the family to see what her father knows. There is nonetheless a refinement, a deepening of her father's teaching that pertains to herself alone. Her groundbreaking discoveries are at first mocked by her colleagues. Isolated and alone, she decides to commit suicide cooking a meal that contains a poisonous mushroom she herself has picked. "She brings the steaming forkful to her lips. Something stops her. Signals flood her muscles, finer than any words. Not this. Come with. Fear Nothing. The fork drops back to the plate. She rouses as from sleepwalking" (128). Patricia, who seemed already attuned with nature, needs to divest herself more thoroughly of her all too human need for recognition. *The Secret Forest*, the book that will eventually gain her academic success and renown, is born from within a more radical immersion in nature. This trajectory makes her a more palatable instructor for the reader as s/he can relate to the hardships of building a deeper awareness of what surrounds us more easily.

Her most important work depends on a radical exposure: "the particle of her private self rejoins everything it has been split off from – the plan of runaway green. *I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was going in*" (129, italics in the text). Patricia's plunge out of public recognition is the necessary step to develop a more essential relationship with nature: "She no longer theorizes or speculates. Just watches, notes, and sketches into a stack of notebooks" (129). She dreams Powers' dream: "What frightens people most will one day turn to wonder. And then people will do what four billion years have shaped them to do: stop and see just what it is they're seeing" (130).

Moreover, Patricia's character draws on the parabolic form that structures the whole book. She can now see what she thought she knew in a more truthful way and thus experiences the affective and existential conversion that is its end. Significantly, *The Secret Forest* is the link that connects all the characters of the book, a material-object that circulates and mobilizes both the thematic notions which are central to the novel and the potential for personal conversion. Each character, in fact, finds in Patricia's book not only teachings about the complex life of forests but a way to reflect on the status of his/her perceptual awareness and to decide on its strengthening for its strengthening. It keeps Olivia and Nick company while they sit in Mimas giving more profound meaningfulness to the gigantic tree that is their house for some weeks; it provides the network structure and the concept of collaborative and diffuse leadership that Neelay wants his teams of coders to model. We will see in more detail the book's role in Dorothy and Ray's life.

The book thus takes roots and produces seeds, while branching in the spatio-temporal and affective spheres of each character's life: *The Secret Forest* spreads what we might call the-stop-and-see-philosophy among the characters. Olivia after being dead by electrocution for seventy seconds spills over the edge of the bed, hits the floor and returns to life; her new life is marked by her hearing voices that guide her to Solace, California, to join an activist group headed by Mother N. – "Now she is primed to see" (165) the narrator comments. Mimi Ma wakes from her life as an engineer becoming aware of what lives in her office yard: "In a few steps, she is outside. The smell is on her before she reaches the tress... the clean smell of her childhood's only untouched days ... she breathes in, eyes closed, the trees real name" (180, 182-3). The experience changes Mimi Ma forever: she becomes an activist and eventually joins the same group Olivia has joined in Solace. When their plan to bomb the foundation of a luxury resort goes awry and Olivia is killed, the activists disperse and we meet Mimi Ma who has now become an eye-contact therapist. Her job revolves around prolonged and uninterrupted eye-contact with her clients which produces a telepathic-like communication that divests both Mimi and her client of any veil. Interestingly, once again, the consequences of this exercise in nakedness is precisely that ability to see what was there but was invisible on which any chance to change something revolves:

Something sharp grazes [Stephanie's – Mimi's client] face... The culprit floats in front of her, purple-pink, the colors of a five-year-old crazed sketch ... The sight takes root in her, ramifying, and for a moment longer she remembers: her life has been as wild as a plum in spring (405).

I would like to conclude this analysis of the extended analogy of the tree and the underlying parabolic form by considering Dorothy Cazaly. She is given the central position – the fifth out of nine characters – in the "Roots" section, a placing which, in itself, may be taken as an indication of her meaningfulness in the overall orchestration of the novel. In many ways, Patricia, Olivia and Mimi Ma share, if differently and at different stages of their lives, the ability to tune their ears to the lower frequencies and to listen to what trees have to say. Once we connect the narrative dots and discover that Mimi Ma is actually the woman who leans on the pine bark in the first prologue and remember its final sentence – "Listen. There's something you need to hear" (4) – we could actually consider her the privileged recipient of

the story the book tells and the kind of reader Powers is trying to conjure up for his novel.

The beginning of the section titled “Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly” strikes a completely different note: “They’re not hard to find: two people for whom trees mean almost nothing. Two people who, even in the spring of their lives, can’t tell an oak from a linden” (64). An intellectual property lawyer and a stenographer who works for his firm, we follow them through their courtship and marriage following the ups and downs of a typical heterogeneous pair who have to find the difficult squaring of their relational circle. Ray’s playing MacDuff and wearing oak branches to march across the stage to attack Macbeth provides him just with a momentary lapse into consciousness that does not change matters substantially. The pair set out to celebrate their anniversaries in a way that reminds them of their growing love: “Every year ... let’s go to the nursery and find something for the yard ... Not every plant we plant will thrive. But together we can watch the ones that do fill up our garden” (71). This does not imply that they have learned about plants, but that they want to create a symbolic connection between something that is inside them and that they know and something that is outside them and that they do not know. Their trajectory passes through the projection of an aestheticizing concept onto the non-human world.

Here too we can recognize Powers at work in creating the parabolic bridge we presented at the beginning. Well in keeping with their statistically belonging to the great majority of those who are tree-blind, they cannot evolve from the romantic phase they go through and share with many others: they plant and they forget and then they forget to plant altogether. We are shown the development of their relationship, which gets stranded in vain fertility treatments: life denies Dorothy her only desire, a baby. In the meantime: “out in the yard, all around the house, the things they’ve planted in years gone by are making significance, making meaning, as easily as they make sugar and wood from nothing, from air, and sun, and rain. But the humans hear nothing” (168). The authorial narrator (the pine tree?) returns to the basic attitude, which is the stumbling block of any possible solution to the environmental problem – again the absoluteness of a nothing which this something – *The Overstory* – tries to turn into an everything. Their house converts into a library (209) and years pass by with Dorothy piling up hobby after hobby and adultery to fill the chasm she feels inside. He knows and realizes that she is going to leave him but in the very moment this realization dawns on him, “a thing in his brain breaks ... blood floods his cortex, and he owns nothing. Nothing at all but this” (312). On a very basic level, the demonstrative “this” refers to the hemorrhage that shuts out Ray from anything else; it is, however, another tiny textual detail that anchors the diegesis in the deictic field of the present tense, the deictic field that concerns readers too. Several pages later, Dorothy is at Ray’s bedside caring about and attending to his innumerable needs; she feels “*Buried. Alive. Forever. ... For weeks her only thought was, I can’t do this. But practice pares back the impossible. ... With a little more practice, she’ll master even being dead*” (370-1). And yet, the story takes an unexpected turn starting from a moment of attention to what is out there in their backyard.

They follow the instructions of a book titled *Easy Tree IDs* to identify the tree that has stared at them for the last quarter-century: “Once more, the back door’s black enamel knot protests, squeaking in her hand. She makes her way across the yard to the tree. A short journey, repeated ad nauseam, more times than anyone ever signs on for, across the same patch of familiar ground: the path of love” (421). This path of love changes everything in Dorothy because she has entered a new mode of seeing: the backyard that they had planted and then forgotten becomes the stage of a new creation.

Dorothy heads outside and collects twigs, nut and she leaves. Then she brings the evidence back to Ray, and together, with the help of the branching book, they narrow down and name another species. Each time they add a stranger to their list, they stop for days to learn everything they can. ... Each new tree is its own distinct epic, changing the story of what is possible (442).

In this highly symbolic moment, Ray and Dorothy reverse the Adamitic naming act: their naming is not the imposition of an arbitrary label, but the recognition of an already existing individuality. In a sense, they become the recipients of the gift of seeing and distinguishing, their naming the manifestation of a broadening of their family: strangers become friends and in this newly acquired status they are ready to tell their own distinct epic “each one with its unique history, biography, chemistry, economics, and behavioral psychology” (442). To make these trees whole and rescue them from the invisibility and amputation the pine tree had lamented at the very beginning of the book, Patricia’s *The Secret Forest* enters the Brinkmans’ stage too:

A page or two may take them a day. Everything they thought their backyard was is wrong, and it takes some time to grow new beliefs to replace the ones that fall. They sit together in silence and survey their acreage as if they have traveled to another planet. Every leaf out there connects, underground. Dorothy takes the news life a shocking revelation in a nineteenth-century novel of manners, where one character’s awful secret ripples through every life in the entire village (443).

Here again the parabolic form is at work: new beliefs grow concerning what Ray and Dorothy thought they knew.

The journey to this other planet situated in their backyard brings them a final gift: the chestnut, “the tree which should not be there” (468) turns into their much longed-for child, their daughter, the tree planted because its seedling had started to grow in a paper cup on their windowsill. Dorothy feeds on Ray’s power of seeing refined to perfection by his immobility and they can see their daughter in the backyard: “and when the girl turns around and lifts her face, in this other life unfolding invisibly alongside the one that happened, Dorothy sees the face of her daughter, ready to take on all of life” (460). From within this dream, which is the instantiation of what Dorothy has learned from Patricia’s book – “You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor ... that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes” (443) – the Brinkman Woodlands Restoration Project is born: doing nothing – that is, no more mowing – in the backyard. Now Dorothy is in her seventies, “wildness advances on all sides of the house” and “the whole street is ready to stone her” (467), a fancy way of being civilly disobedient which delights her: “*here I am, near the finish line, loving life again*” (468 italics in the text). In one of the

short sections of the closing part, “Seeds”, we meet Dorothy and Ray one last time: “they lie against each other in his bed, looking out through the window on that place that they’ve discovered, just alongside this one. The place where the story came from” (497). The story is the story of their daughter, but it is the story we are reading as well, the two, one the image of the other – both taking the lead from that other planet that lives just beyond our windowsills, the tree that has become a book that returns into a tree, a branching book, indeed. Ray dies and Dorothy now measures time as the trees she has learned to know and love do: “*How can it happen now? ... We were just beginning to understand each other*” (498, italics in the text).

The trajectory from a person “for whom trees mean almost nothing” (64) to this powerful awareness about her life is all the more astonishing because it happens in her backyard. Dorothy’s mind becomes “a slighter greener thing” and the trees drown her in meaning. Her activism is far less radical than Olivia’s and Mimi Ma’s, but powerfully drives home the most important truth: the journey toward understanding our planet as inhabited by us and them, by us together with them, starts from within, and it is mostly internal. Most of all, Dorothy embodies a reflection on motherhood and birth that goes well beyond the biological given but is nonetheless rooted in that inherently female dimension. Dorothy, is, in a way, the character who most resembles a tree: she changes and grows while standing still. The ordinariness of Dorothy’s life, her traveling enormous distances while staying at home, may be the reason why she occupies the center of the “Roots” section, the blueprint for a new way of living in our own homes.

All the women that inhabit *The Overstory* relate profoundly with Powers’ core intention of writing a story about the reanimation of the world. More explicitly than in the storylines of their male companions, they demonstrate they prove more willing to be “open to experiences of nature as powerful, agentic and creative” (Plumwood 2009: n.p.). They are granted a more abundant dose of this awareness and thus they are greener because they are closer to understanding the meaning of metamorphosis. *The Overstory* riffs again and again on the notion of metamorphosis, starting from the references to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a book Patricia receives from her father on her fourteenth birthday: “Patricia opens the book to the first sentence and reads: *Let me sing to you now, about how people turn into other things*” (117). Metamorphosis is what happens in the natural world repeatedly: it is predicated on a conception of time as cyclic rather than linear and of life as comprising death. Metamorphosis implies regeneration, from roots to seeds and potentially back to roots, an integral system in which agency is diffused and collaborative and true mastery becomes the capacity to let things happen according to a network-oriented system. Powers’ novel tries to incorporate and model this system which is how life at its most basic works. Women are greener because they are the incarnation of the human which is biologically more apt to understand the crucial metamorphosis from I to other. The female body allows a cluster of cells completely dependent on the biological environment that surrounds it to become an independent body, autonomous and separated from the female body, which has created the very conditions for this separation. The female body both imposes and accepts this metamorphosis: the implications of this basic biological process concern a thor-

ough reconceptualization of the related notions of agency and mastery. Female characters are echo chambers that amplify the possibility of an interpretation of reality as biocentric rather than anthropocentric or ecofeminist. Whereas Patricia is the godmother to biocentrism and cooperation first with *The Secret Forest* and then with *The New Metamorphosis*, Olivia and Mimi Ma go through radical conversion moments that allow for a decentering that leads them to rethink their place in a world that has revealed itself to be more meaningful and interconnected than they thought.

In Dorothy's case, as I have tried to argue, Powers provides the quintessential movement from blindness to light. It is highly significant that Dorothy's chapter is her husband's too: the sections devoted to them make clear how Dorothy's growing greenness is a joint venture rooted in her ability to wait and listen and wait again. "The path of love" is the manifestation of a female energy that circulates and feeds life well beyond the actual manifestations of motherhood. I am aware that invoking a female principle may sound rather unpleasant to ecofeminists as it might strike a homogenizing and essentialist note concerning women. I am, nonetheless, convinced that this is what lies at the pulsating center of the novel, not in terms of feminine idealization, but as an instantiation of an ability to embody a relationality, a willingness to let otherness live, that may apply to all.

The parabolic form reaches its destination once the listener becomes able to see what he could not see before, past cognitive biases and dualistic approaches toward a universality which depends on depicting nature, to use Plumwood's words, in "the active voice" (2009). I have tried to argue that Powers' most macroscopic choices – the authorial narrative voice, possibly as belonging to the non-human and the present tense correlated with the deictic field of the now and here – are the formal instantiations of a universal grammar, so to speak, that he is trying to return to. "From nowhere, in a heartbeat, Nick understands what Maidenhair's voices must always have meant. *The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help. Not them; us. Help from all quarters*" (493, italics in the text). The planet is one and the two interpretations are both possible, as life, human and nonhuman, needs help.

It is highly significant in this respect that Powers' polyphonic novel ends with two scenes that echo each other: the first concerns Mimi Ma and closes the frame the first prologue had opened, the second concerns Nick who has eventually managed to compose a huge wood installation with the help of a native man in a red plaid and his sons and a friend. Mimi Ma listens to what the signals coming from the pine tree tell her: "Do not hope or despair or predict or be caught surprised. Never capitulate, but divide, multiply, transform, conjoin, do and endure as you have all the long day of life....A thing can travel everywhere, just by holding still" (500). "The transported pieces of downed wood snake through the standing trees. Satellites high up above this work already take pictures from orbit. The shapes turn into letters ... and the letters spell out a gigantic word legible from space: STILL" (502).

Still: Dorothy's learning and becoming greener by holding still; the injunction Mimi Ma has just heard. Still: the article Ray could not wrap his head around while

thinking about Dorothy's betrayal, Christopher Stone's "Should Trees Have Standing?", which advocates for a paradigm shift that is still underway.

He stares off into the north woods, where the next project beckons. Branches, combing the sun, laughing at gravity, still unfolding. Something moves at the base of the motionless trunks. Nothing. Now everything. *This*, a voice whispers, from very nearby. *This*. *What we have been given. What we must earn. This will never end* (502).

The parabolic form has reached its destination, the field that needs to become visible in all its entangled complexity: the here and now of this, the life of the planet in the present tense.

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