

Multispecies Justice and the Capitalocene: Interconnected Lives in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*

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Abstract

This research examines both the theoretical underpinnings of multispecies justice as well as its implications and literary representation in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. It draws on the anthropological reflections of Anna Tsing, especially on interspecies entanglements and ecological precarity, to explore how *The Overstory* provides a compelling narrative framework for imagining a justice beyond the human. The overarching aim is to get insight into the novel's profound critique of capitalist extraction and political resistance to environmental degradation in the Capitalocene, as well as a renewed ethical engagement with the nonhuman world.

Keywords: Capitalism, Dystopia, Ecoprecarity, Multispecies Justice, Resistance, Trees

Introduction

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is a blueprint for a modern literature that engages with pressing ecological and ethical issues of our time. The novel is a complex story that unsettles the anthropocentric worldview by making trees and other non-human entities agents and important focal points. How trees are agents, communicators, and kin are explored in the novel through human-forest entanglements. At one point, Powers (2024) writes: "Trees have long been trying to tell us something, using a language we've forgotten" (p. 04). This language of trees challenges the human exceptionalism and brings to the fore human modes of connection and longevity.

The Overstory tells the story of nine interwoven characters whose lives are inextricably linked to the trees. Their shared history gives them a heightened sense of the devastation of the forest and all that surrounded it, and prompts many of them to enter a resistance and/or activist stance against environmental exploitation. The novel's unique form and multiple perspectives challenge the anthropocentric perspective of the world and show that trees are organized, multi-layered living organisms who communicate and act within the world. Consequently, it forces the reader to question their interactions with the environment and to understand the importance of protecting forests. In the spirit of the "autonomous, self-sufficient subject" of neoliberalism, the narrative reminds the reader of interdependence between human and nonhuman life. Instead of strengthening the long prevailing narratives of human mastery, stability and scalable progress, it foregrounds the vulnerability and interdependence of species as a basis for survival and growth.

Gandotra and Agarwal make a parallel with the Chipko movement in India, where women made their voice heard against deforesting the trees and saving them with their lives. It brings to the fore the intricate relation between women and nature as described in the text. Powers discusses how the domination of women and nature have taken place in both industrialized and patriarchy-based societies. Their research has used the novel's characters to examine the issues of environmental sustainability, which are interlinked with social justice and gender equality. The analysis encourages people to look at their relationship with nature and act in order to save and protect it. It also aims to draw attention to the key importance of protecting the environment and women.

Using Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, Masiero (2020) reads hauntology into *The Overstory*'s trees. An awful reminder of the continuity, endurance and temporal existence that goes beyond life and death come from trees—especially those which have stood for centuries. Powers encourages readers to reconsider

This study has used a qualitative interpretive approach to examine *The Overstory* by Richard Powers in the context of multispecies justice as discussed by Russell A. Powell and Anna Tsing and Capitalocene by Jason W. Moore. This research, based on the novel's greater textual analysis, explores and presents the interdependence of all species, human and non-human, as well as the agency of trees, and questions anthropocentric perspectives. At the same time, the Capitalocene's structure allows for an investigation of the concept of ecological destruction as a result of capitalism's accumulation, extraction and commodification in the story. Taking these theories together, this paper provides a critical examination of *The Overstory* as a literary work that can challenge the dominant human-centred and capitalist worldviews while imagining alternative ways to live with the other species.

Previous researches on the novel have explored the narrative from an eco-critical view. As Gandotra and Agarwal (2020) delve into *The Overstory*'s profound wisdom and insight, they offer an exploration of the human-nature connection and trees in particular. It seriously explores the ecological crises of deforestation and its unlimited effects from an eco-feminist perspective, with the themes of sustainability, civilization and the role of women in preserving the environment. Through their study, they recognise trees as symbols of life, memory, resilience and perseverance. Trees symbolize the sustainability of nature, which is always there and is not destroyed by humans. Gandotra and Agarwal's thoughts on the exploitation of nature by the industrialization and modernization. This paper is meant to be acknowledgment of the important place that women occupy in *The Overstory* in their preservation of their environment. The women are seen as central players in all the activism in the novel. their perspectives of environmental sustainability by using the temporal and spatial divide between humans and trees. In addition to criticizing the human relationship with the environment, *The Overstory* gives a futuristic perspective for a more compassionate and interconnected life in which human and non-human life forms co-exist.

The Overstory by Richard Powers is a richly written narrative with a profound ecological awareness, which has led to much scholarly interest. The novel has been examined in many critical frameworks, such as environmental activism and post-humanism. However, it has still not been analyzed under the rubrics of 'multispecies justice' and 'Capitalocene'. The concepts focus on the injustice of the ideas of capitalist exploitation and point to the socio-ecological crises developed by Global Capitalism. *The Overstory* can be read through these key lenses to gain insight into structural inequalities. This kind of reading highlights the fragility of ecosystems and that of humans and non-humans that are entangled with them.

Capitalocene and the Exploitation of Nature

Drawing from his seminal book *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015), Jason W. Moore's notion of the Capitalocene constitutes a radical critique of the prevalent assumption that the near-capacity ecological crisis is a result of humanity as a whole. This theoretical change is important in comprehending the cause of ecological degradation. Moore does not single out human beings as a single entity, but draws attention to the historical context of the mechanisms that have brought about planetary destabilization, which can be found in the capitalist world ecology, a system that treats the interaction between humanity and nature as a process of commodification, exploitation and abstraction. Moore makes the argument that "The capitalocene is not the history of capitalism as an economic system, but of capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology" (Moore, 2015, p. 173). Capitalism is not just using nature in this view. However, it is produced as an economic product actively, through processes that make it "cheap" (cheap labor, cheap food, cheap energy, cheap raw materials, and externalization of sociological and ecological costs) – and that is what capital is made of.

Cheap nature is a key part of Moore's theory and a criticism of Cartesian dualism, which distinguishes nature from society. Nature is not a thing, not a system, but a relation, and that is a historically specific relation," he insists (Moore, 2015, p.3). In this manner, nature is not a passive, inert object but is entangled in very systems that are being exploited by them. This relational ontology is a challenge to the mechanistic and reductionist ontologies characteristic of capitalist modernity.

Moore also applies the metaphor of the tap and the sink to the relationship between capitalism and nature, referring to it as a "tap" as it provides cheap raw materials, including wood, minerals and energy, and a "sink" for waste, pollutants and ecological harm. Capitalism does not just take resources from nature but spits them back out into nature again, as Moore(2022) puts it, "Nature is the tap and the sink in service of capital accumulation." (p. 81). *The Overstory* (2024) by Richard Powers, winner of the Pulitzer Prize, is a good fictional response to Moore's theoretical work. In a polyphonic narrative centered on trees as witnesses to history and consciousness, Powers constructs a story of ecological violence of the Capitalocene and points to an alternative, post-capitalist way of being in the world.

The organization of *The Overstory*, broken up into 4 parts, each with a title that suggests a different growth level of the tree – "Roots", "Trunk", "Crown" and "Seeds" – encourages the reader to think of the tree's growth in time, as opposed to man's growth and time. This formal selection is a critique of capitalist time, which has focused on linear time progress, efficiency and short-term profit, rather than on cyclical, intergenerational time of ecosystems. Capitalism and short time horizons go hand in hand, as Moore puts it, and the worldview that prevails is one that demands short-term profit at the cost of long-term ecological sustainability. In resisting this logic, Powers' novel foregrounds the lives of trees, some of which can live for centuries or even millennia, and thus offers a reorientation of human time vis-à-vis the deep time of forests.

The human de-centering of this narrative is present in the novel at every turn, and it is finally reiterated in the novel's last line: "The world start over again without people" (Powers, 2024, p.502). This line is not just about the annihilation of humans, but also the survival and vitality of non-human life in the face of Anthropogenic destruction. It reflects Moore's point that capitalism is not just an economic system but a way of making the world, structuring life and death in terms of relations of power, extraction and alienation. Many of the characters' lives are radically transformed by their interactions

with trees, and some of the stories serve to illustrate the ecological violence of capitalist systems.

Of these, one stands out in particular: Douglas Pavlicek, First-Time-Vietnam-War-Veteran and lifelong tree planter of the American Landscape, only to find out later that his work has been adopted by industrial forestry. His insight about such reforestation works as commercial plantations for timber production is quite a eye-opener, as it exposes the ways in which capitalism commodifies even ecological restoration. Pavlicek is miffed, "They say it's better than clear-cutting. But the places they've cut don't look like something he'd want to live in" (Powers, 2024, p.245). This disillusionment got to Moore's "cheap nature," which posits that trees are not collaborators in a living web, but rather a resource for harvesting, processing, and selling.

The forests are exploited for wood and left ecologically degraded with no capacity to sustain biodiversity, taking advantage of Moore's 'tap and sink' approach. The industrial system takes value and produces ecological waste. In like fashion, Patricia Wasterwood's account of a scientist who has found that trees communicate and cooperate via a network of fungi beneath the surface of the ground runs counter to the capitalist mindset of seeing humans as independent beings competing with one another. Stating "It's not that trees are like us, we're like trees, and the more we learn, the more fantastic the similarity becomes" (Powers, 2024, p. 385), challenges anthropocentric assumptions and echoes Moore's relational ecology in which nature and society, as a relational whole, are mutually constitutive.

The marginalization of Patricia by the scientific community and the subsequent vindication of her research is a testament to the capitalist system's resistance to ecological knowledge which challenges its extractive agenda. Her research reveals the understated infrastructures of cooperation found in forests, those very infrastructures that capitalism can't easily see because they can't be quantified, privatized or monetized.

The novel is also filled with characters of radical ecological resistance, such as Olivia Vandergriff and Adam Appich. A near death experience prompts Olivia to a spiritual awakening and puts her on a path of direct action for old-growth forests as an environmental activist. Her willingness to act out on behalf of life when it is at odds with "life outside human interests" (Moore, 2015, p.151) reflects a strong moral conviction that she refers to as a "required confrontation of the 'system of power, profit, and reproduction in the web of life'" (Moore, 2015, p.172). Her death during the protest spirals, serves as a warning of the bloody measures that the state and corporate powers take to maintain the capitalist status quo.

As a psychologist who is studying group behaviour, Adam is at first studying activism detached from it, but gradually becomes part of it, perhaps symbolising the shift in consciousness Moore imagines in the fight against the Capitalocene. But Powers isn't making activism romantic, either; there are terrible repercussions, and the characters' experience of being surveilled and arrested, and their psychological suffering, underscores the systematic repression of those who oppose capitalist hegemony.

In addition, *The Overstory* asks the reader to consider the nature of value, beauty, and use itself, and how it is mediated in the context of capitalism. Ecologically valuable trees are classified as "weed species" and must be eradicated, or forests are limited to "inventory" or "board feet". This dehumanization of living systems into productivity is what Moore calls "a central element of the Capitalocene," an epistemological paradigm which treats nature as an external, inert, and exploitable object.

Powers, in contrast, provides an alternative epistemology in one that is based on awe, reciprocity, and relationality. This is perhaps

most clearly seen in the character of Neelay Mehta, a computer genius who makes a virtual reality simulation based on the intelligence of trees. He works in the tech world, but Neelay's virtual world can be a haven and a way to foster ecological consciousness.

His work plays with the dialectics of capitalism and resistance and the argument that Moore makes is that alternatives to the Capitalocene must come from the web of life, not from outside of the web of life. New relationships with nature cannot be based on green capitalism or techno-fixes, they must be a complete reconfiguration of values, labour relationships and ethics (Moore, 2015, p.276). In Moore's terms, this means abandoning the logic of cheap nature and imagining a world in which nature is no longer simply the place where externalities are dumped or values are extracted from it, but a co-creator of values, meanings, and futures.

The interrelatedness of all living beings never becomes a utopia, but is actually an experience and scientific fact throughout *The Overstory*. The theme that trees are not merely background to human drama again creeps back in, agents, memory, communicators. This focus on non-human agency aligns with Moore's critique of Cartesian dualism and Enlightenment rationality which underpinned capitalist exploitation by placing humans on a pedestal, above nature. Rather, both Moore and Powers say, the relational understanding is one that draws humans into a larger network of life. Its ecological perspective goes beyond individual ethics or behavior; it's systematic, political, and fundamentally structural. It calls not only for awareness, but resistance, transformation, new stories, stories without humanity as the center, new stories which lift the integrity of all the life forms. The novel, therefore, calls for multispecies justice.

Ecological Resistance and Multispecies Justice

Multispecies justice is a theoretical and ethical concept which aims to bring the justice concept into the scope of things other than human interests. It asserts that all animals, plants, fungi and ecosystems, apart from humans, have intrinsic value and agency and should be accorded moral valuation and political inclusion. Traditionally the liberal humanist ideas of "justice" have been geared towards the rational human being and have denied non-human forms of life legal, ethical and political recognition. Multispecies justice, on the other hand, recognises non-human actors as valid actors in ethical and political dialogue. Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* is a haunting work of fiction that is deeply connected to the fragile, complex ecosystems that give life and that hold the human species in thrall, that skewers anthropocentrism.

The new concept of justice brings with it a reconsideration of fundamental political concepts like rights, sovereignty and citizenship. But the granting of "legal personhood" to rivers in New Zealand and India, or the inclusion of animal rights in constitutional design, is just a sign of more general change in legal and political thinking. But multispecies justice is more than just inclusion – it's relationality, too. It recognizes justice as part of a dynamic of dependency and co-creation between human and non-human life. This way, multispecies justice challenges the dualism that has been created between human and nature and embraces an entangled, co-constituted world. Therefore, it is a basic assault on the prevailing political doctrines, those based on liberalism and capitalism, and anthropocentrism.

Traditional liberal political theory is oriented toward the individual, rationality and property rights, and has never included the non-human domain. The animals, plants and ecosystems are considered resources or tools for humans, but not political objects. Capitalism, with its growth- and profit-based motivations, degrades nature and promotes ecological devastation via extractivist processes. The idea of multispecies justice, however, is more aligned with concepts like ecological socialism, posthumanism, and

Indigenous cosmopolitics. They challenge the anthropocentric and exploitative basis of modernity, and aim to think differently about the human-nature relationship as one of reciprocity, ethics, and co-dependency. Multispecies justice requires changing political and economic systems that marginalize or destroy non-human others by focusing on the agency and value of non-human life.

Together with Anna Tsing's ecological anthropology, *The Overstory* provides an intriguing argument for justice as multispecies. The novel's narrative, character development and thematic exploration make it a strong critique of anthropocentrism and capitalist exploitation, and a statement of the agency of non-humans, their value and their interdependence. The recognition of humans' need for different forms of life, including invisible ones, directly strengthens the idea of assemblages that is prevalent in Tsing's work. It shows how human life is situated in a network of multispecies interdependence and agency, rather than at the top of an institution of dominance. In this book Powers tells the story of the interconnectedness of all life, calling into question anthropocentric narratives and the need for inter-species collaboration. The novel is organized much like an assemblage, with various human lives intricately connected together to form a whole, shaped by trees. Solitary characters at first glance include Nick Hoel, Mimi Ma, Patricia Westerford and Douglas Pavlicek, but in the end they all come together because they all have ties to the forest. Assemblages are contingent, emergent and non-hierarchical and this storytelling approach reflects those qualities.

A key moment illustrating this occurs when the characters come together in their environmental activism. The tree-sitting protest is not a political movement in the Pacific Northwest, but a collection of people, trees, animals, and landscapes united by a felt precarity and potential for hope. This is what happened with Olivia Vandergriff after a near death experience and her interaction with the trees.

Tsing's analysis of matsutake mushrooms is encapsulated in the words "ruins of capitalism," as these mushrooms are resilient, mutually dependent, and decentralized in their creation of value. How Power tells it, the Redwood tree sitters, such as Olivia Vandergriff, establish shaky camps in tree crowns, but do not fight against tree demolition by politics alone, but through vulnerability, bodily presence, and being attuned to tree time. These tree sitters are found in landscapes ravaged by capitalist extraction and assert that forests should be politically recognized. Their lives are delicate; some perish, others are driven off, and others are lost from sight, but their actions are a form of resistance, one that is as fragile as it is ecological, in the sense that Tsing would like to see resistance. In this place, ecoprecarity is performance – vulnerability is politicized and fragile alliances are performed between human, tree and fungal networks.

Since Matsutake grows in ruined places, "we are able to investigate the ruins which are the result of human interference with the earth" (Moore, 2015, p.5). In the same vein, Powers examines the role of trees, forests and the human alliance in traversing the ruins of capitalist exploitation in order to establish new alliances. The most moving scene in *The Overstory* is when all of the characters realize that their lives are part of a larger, interconnected story. "No one is separate that is alive on this earth, not the crows, not the baboons, not us. Everything eats and is eaten, time after time (Powers, 2024, p.123). This resonates with Tsing's focus on the communal effects of living assemblages, in which life and death, loss and recognition interact in a dynamic manner.

Research on tree communication by Patricia Westerford is initially rejected as pseudoscience and represents the ecology's marginalized knowledge. Inherently, Powers' research is about trees "speaking things in words, before words," but she is largely unheard

and it takes a long time before the public comes to understand the interdependence of forests and the environment. This resonates with Tsing who noted how capitalist knowledge will often mask multispecies interdependence with utilitarian schemas. Patricia's slow recognition and her contribution to ecological education both show that knowledge that is not useful for extraction and commodification is fragile, pushed to the margins until it is called into question when ecological collapse occurs.

In the Capitalocene, the Overstory dispenses with the dream of mastery and control. It is a reminder that vulnerability is not weakness, but the groundwork of worlds of ruins, multispecies worlds. In that vulnerability, are there possibilities for ethics, for assemblages of care, attention, and collaborative survival? Tsing's talk of matsutake mushroom businesses flourishing amidst industrial ruins, and Powers' discussion of tree-sitters creating community in redwood crowns, converge in the conclusion that life at the capitalist ruins is dependent on the forms of solidarity that cannot be planned, measured, or scanned, but must be felt, tended, and witnessed. This is the way multispecies justice is realized: not by means of dominance or permanence, but through fragile resilience, shared responsibility, and sensitivity to the fragile beauty of multispecies life in a Capitalocene world.

Dystopian Dream of Nature Replication

The theme of interconnectedness, or the intricate web linking all life together, was explored in *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, through the character of Neelay Mehta, who constructs a virtual ecosystem, "The WorldTree." Rather than utopian fantasy, Powers intentionally sets her world up as dystopian, revealing the tensions and contradictions that lie in the ways in which human beings try to simulate and control interconnectedness that exists in nature. Mehta's WorldTrees is a large-scale digital simulation that simulates the complexity of forest ecology by letting trees in the virtual environment grow, interact with each other, and die based on algorithms derived from real ecosystems. Powers, writes Mehta, "created a universe in his computer, an elaborate mosaic of leaves and branches and roots, a vast interconnected living web" (2024, p.345). The virtual forest also embodies the interconnectedness of the natural world, with its elements all reliant on one another, echoing the overall theme of the novel about the significance of ecological relationships. However, in this digital realm, the hopeful unity that could be created is offset by dystopian forces: Mehta becomes even more removed and confined from his creation; his life is a metaphor for modern human beings' alienation from the living Earth. The WorldTree may appear alive but is actually limited to the artificial realm of software, highlighting the need of ecological connection, which is not replaceable by technology. This is why Powers proposes in his story that no simulated nature can match the vitality and unpredictability of real nature as well as its spiritual essence. This is particularly stressed when Mehta muses, "he was lost in his own design, a god trapped in a world that was not his" (Powers, 2024, p.352). It is a heart-felt said line, encapsulating the paradox of Mehta's attempt – the creator of a system who tries to control it, who ends up being controlled by it, limit of human control over nature.

Furthermore, Powers doesn't hesitate to portray the darker aspects of human technological arrogance. The complexity that is beautiful in the virtual world is programed by algorithms, a reminder that it is beautiful because it is constructed and maintained by human design and is subject to human flaws and failings. Unlike the spontaneous, self-organizing process of real forests, the simulation by Mehta is fragile, dependent on code and servers, and thus a precarious system. Despite its majestic splendor, it was a fragile machine, relying on electricity and code that could be corrupted" (Powers, 2024, p.347). This metaphor of fragility can be applied to the

Earth as well; the feeling is that with human domination and technological capabilities, there is no guarantee for ecological survival.

The emergence of the virtual world comes at a time when the environment is getting worse, while Mehta has been moving towards virtual areas. Moreover, the virtual world is coming at a time when the environment is becoming more and more polluted, while Mehta has been retreating into virtual spaces. Mehta's creation is a synthetic haven, while in the real world, nature faces the dangers of deforestation, loss of species and the impact of climate change, highlighting man's inability to safeguard the interdependence of nature. Powers makes this contrast explicit: "Out here, trees were still being cut down, forest was being diminished, but inside the WorldTree new grooves were springing up forever" (Powers, 2024, p.349). This juxtaposition is a condemnation of the modern approach which tends to retreat to virtual worlds or to abstract knowledge, in the direct face of the concrete crisis of the biosphere.

The theme of human isolation in the face of interconnected systems underlies Neelay Mehta's story as well. During his academic success, Mehta feels a deep sense of loneliness, which is shared by a society that has lost touch with themselves and nature. Mehta's solitude is described by Powers: "He lived in a room of screens and servers: a kingdom without subjects, his only companions the simulated creatures he had conjured" (Powers 351). The image is quite dystopian because there is loneliness, no real connection, but only one that is artificially created.

But Mehta's virtual world is no replacement for the messy, unpredictable relationship that is real life, and his inability to be attached to it indicates a spiritual price that comes with living through technology. The novel proposes that relationships to nature and people are not merely simulated, but embodied, in order to be truly interconnected. As in Mehta's untimely death, this is a story of a fall from glory to oblivion and a descent into despair. Powers therefore employs Mehta's path as a cautionary tale against the deceptive and vacuous promise of digital escapism as a remedy to ecological crises.

The dystopian nature of Mehta's creation suggests that Powers is focusing on the interconnectedness of nature, as there is no utopia to discover. The novel does not make the theme easy to "read" in order to imagine it as an idealized version in which the recognition of connection is always followed by harmony. Rather, it offers a complex, precarious, and troubled sense of connectedness, one that is easily fractured by the human avarice, ignorance and alienation. This is clearly seen, as Powers writes, "The web of life was unravelling thread by thread, while some were looking to create patterns in digital code" (Powers, 2024, p.355). The tension at the heart of the novel is captured in this sentiment, as nature is destroyed while man is connected by technology. In this way, Powers positions Mehta's tale into a larger ecological and philosophical critique: "True interconnectedness is not a natural given, but a process that must be undertaken with humility, care, and transformation.

The Overstory by Richard Powers is a rich exploration of the possibility of living in harmony with the planet, of the potential for technological hubris, and of the spiritual consequences of disconnecting from it. The WorldTrees contrasts the harmony that is simulated with the ecological crises that are happening in the real world, such as deforestation and ecological degradation. Powers condemns humanity for its inability to live in harmony with nature's interconnectedness that supports life. Mehta's solitude and eventual calamity demonstrates that virtual relationships and ecological responsibility are inadequate. By weaving these delicate and sobering threads through the story, Powers invites readers to acknowledge the interconnectedness as not some ideal or a technological feat, but a reality with a call to ethical and spiritual action. The dystopian setting

is a strong warning for the reader, because if the human race does not make a fundamental change, the living world will become inestimable and we will be forced to restrict entanglements to the man-made world. In this respect, *The Overstory* is not only a depiction of Moore's Capitalocene, but it also brings it to life, makes it exciting, and makes its stakes emotional and existential in a way. When combined into a single story, Moore's theory and Powers' narrative reveals ecological crisis as the inevitable consequence of a system that is engineered to gain capital at the expense of life. In both works we are faced with a question to ask ourselves: What is our role in the world? Are we masters of nature? Or are we part of a huge, interdependent community of nature that is fragile and impermanent?

Combining economic critique, ecological science, and literary imagination, Moore and Powers are a potent indictment of capitalist modernity and a tentative blueprint for imagining a life beyond the Capitalocene. They are calling us to see beyond the trees and beyond the possibility of a system of life being forever dominated by the logic of capital. The call is loud: fight abstraction of capital, reinhabit our ecological relations, plant the seeds of solidarity and survival in the soil.

Redrawing Boundaries and Technological Mediation

In *The Overstory*, Richard Powers's subtle examination of the intertwining relationship between people and nature, and specifically people and trees, is a powerful reflection on the complex and interconnected nature of humanity and the natural world, and an urgent call for ecological consciousness in the era of environmental degradation. A theme of technological mediation is explored: the way in which technology reconstructs, filters and distorts human perception and relationships with nature, as well as its moral implications in the context of the Capitalocene, a period of capitalist environmental destruction. In Powers' portrayal of Neelay Mehta and his invention of the WorldTree, an extensive virtual forest system, Powers offers a sophisticated and often ambiguous analysis of the potential for technology to enhance ecological insight, as well as its capacity to alienate, control, and pose an ethical challenge.

WorldTree is a fascinating example of technological mediation in *The Overstory* that is created by Neelay Mehta. Neelay Mehta creates WorldTree, an extraordinary example of technological mediation in *The Overstory*. A computer programmer and ecological visionary, Mehta builds a virtual ecosystem in his computer, modeled on the complex web of relationships and life patterns found in nature's forests. Powers says that this creation is an "elaborate mosaic of leaves and branches and roots, a vast interconnected living web" (2024, p.345); it is a digital simulacrum that represents the scientific findings about the intricate communication web among trees, including discoveries by Patricia Westerfoerd, which involved studies on the mycorrhizal fungi.

Mehta is able to imagine and understand the intricate symbiotic interplay that keeps forests alive – an interplay which goes beyond what the human senses and scientific research can perceive – thanks to the WorldTrees. In this respect, technology can be seen as a bridge, connecting and making visible the network of life, and connecting to another form of ecological consciousness that is more relational.

The project's aim to make visible and explicit the interconnectedness of life is a larger environmental and ethical project that seeks to de-anthropocentrize worldview and instead promote an understanding of the interdependence of the multiple species in the world. Now, as Powers tells the story, Mehta thought that his WorldTree "could change the way people understood the world" (2024, p.346). The virtual forest might spark a general ethical awakening, showing that every single entity – including humans – is

not alone but connected in a huge interplay of support and communication.

However, Powers is careful not to convey the impression of simply being optimistic about this technological mediation, but to also make it seem ethically fraught and ambivalent. WorldTree is a huge, complex machine, but ultimately, it's a fragile machine, a simulation which runs on electronic hardware and relies on fragile digital infrastructure. Though grand, it was a fragile machine, reliant on electricity and code that could be corrupted, Powers says, "For all its magnificence, it was a machine that needed electricity, a machine that needed code that could not be corrupted" (2024, p.347). Fragility metaphorically applies to ecological precarity of real forests, but also to a basic ethical constraint: autonomy, randomness, and organic richness of ecosystems are not easily replaceable with technological mediation.

The virtual forest is an artefact of human design and human control, and has limits set by computer programming and human intention. In addition, Powers discusses the potential for technology to be a means of distancing oneself from nature, instead of reconciling with it. While Neelay Mehta is one of the makers of this complex digital forest, he feels more and more disconnected from life and human civilization. He "lived in a room of screens and servers, a kingdom without subjects, his only companion the simulated creatures he had conjured" (Powers, 2024, p.351). The digital world in which Mehta places digital organisms is a place of connection while for the human creator it's a space of loneliness and detachment. This is a fundamental moral dilemma in the story of Powers.

Technology can shed light on ecological relationships and increase people's disconnect from nature. Mehta's predicament serves as a cautionary tale against moving any ecological relation from embodied experience and place into the realm of data or virtual experience, and the spiritual and emotional price of the interposition of mediated artificial environments into the embodied, place-based ecology. In this light, technological mediation in *The Overstory* is a reflection on the larger contradiction of the Capitalocene, the current period that sees capitalist industrialism ravage the planet with unabated extraction, and commodification. The WorldTree is an organism both complex and an outcome of capitalist technological mastery.

In contrast, Powers contrasts Mehta's virtual forest with the destruction of forests and land use that goes on in the real world by the logging industry, developers, and capitalists. Mehta's virtual forest, for instance, celebrates the ecological wisdom and respect for trees that is sorely lacking in Douglas Pevlicek's life as a logging worker, whose struggles are described in the novel. Outside, trees were still being cut down, the forests were being cleared, and, within The WorldTree, new groves sprouted forever (Powers, 2024, p.349). This extreme disparity is a criticism of the Capitalocene's destructive logic and a probe into what technological idealism can achieve when it lies within capitalist frameworks that focus on growth and exploitation over ecological health.

Moreover, Powers challenges the idea that technological mediation is a simple way to promote environmental ethics by demonstrating that the digital simulation may turn into a space of control and commodification. Initially a visionary project, the WorldTree becomes a product just like any other product, and is an object of corporate interest and market forces, which therefore will be used for the sake of profit rather than ecological care. Mehta's ultimate rejection and isolation represent the moral danger of using technology instead of real ecological involvement. This story implies that technology might not solve the basic moral issue in the Capitalocene: the subjugation of nature by the economy and the suppression of agency in the other species.

Meanwhile, Powers has no qualms about technology. The novel suggests that with the understanding of science, moral obligation and technology, one can help meet the goal of ecological awareness and activism. Another type of technological mediation is the language of science, which is used to present Patricia Westerford's scientific findings about how trees communicate and cooperate, inspiring characters to engage in preservation and protest. These acts of care are a hopeful aspect of the work of technology; a relational ethics that recognizes interdependence and promotes multispecies flourishing is possible.

However, Powers says that the mediation has to come with humility and caring. He cautions against technological hubris: "the idea that humans can control or fully master an ecological system through data or simulations. Mehta's woeful journey and eventual rejection reinforce this caution. The broader ecological ethics in the novel are one of the good old days in which nature's autonomy and complexity cannot be reduced to human models, and in which technology is not a substitute for direct relationality with the environment, but rather a tool for it.

The Overstory by Richard Powers is a richly ambivalent book in which technology and ethics are always in the middle of things. The book follows Neelay Mehta's virtual WorldTree as it reveals the complex interrelationships of life and new perspectives on ecology through technology. Yet Powers also reveals the ethical dilemmas of these mediations: their fragility, their capacity to alienate, their entanglements in the problematic logics of the Capitalocene. The WorldTree represents hope and caution, challenging readers to critically reflect on the impact of technology on human-nature relations and work towards an ecological ethics that is technologically informed but demonstrates humility and embodied care, as well as respect for nonhuman life's autonomy. *The Overstory* offers a valuable reflection on today's environmental debates about the risks and benefits of technology in an age of ecological crisis.

Conclusion

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is a strong literary response to the multiple crises of environmental fragility and capitalism. The novel foregrounds the importance of ethical and practical considerations of recognizing agency, value and interdependence of both human and non-human life through the lens of multispecies justice as described by Anna Tsing. At the same time, Jason Moore's Capitalocene can help situate the systematic drivers of environmental degradation, bringing to the fore the fact that environmental

destruction isn't just a result of people, it's a result of structures of capitalist accumulation. Power's story shows how literature can illuminate the interconnections and how fragile and resilient multispecies networks can be when stressed. *The Overstory* builds on these lenses to propose a multispecies, relational and structural vision of justice, a framework for comprehending and addressing environmental crisis. In this novel, literature becomes an important medium for rethinking ecological ethics and, in a world under siege by technology and economics, the need for collaboration across species is imperative.

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Credit authorship contribution statement

Khadija Farooq & Sarah Abdullah: Writing – Review & Editing, Writing – Original Draft, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Conceptualization.

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