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A Rustling in *The Overstory*: More-Than-Human Storytelling in Richard Powers's Novel

We need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections.

Donna Haraway¹

I guess I'm trying to subjectify the universe, because look where objectifying has gotten us.

Ursula K. Le Guin²

At the opening of Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018)³ a woman is leaning against a pine tree and becomes attentive to its messages. "The tree is saying things, in words before words." It talks about the sun and water, its growth process, and about the need to keep reinventing answers. It commands the woman: "Listen, there's something you need to hear." Other trees join in in a polyphony of voices expressing their stories, predicting the future, debating death and laughing at human ignorance:

Your kind never sees us whole. You miss half of it, and more. There's always as much belowground as above. . . . If your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we'd drown you in meaning.⁴

From the very beginning, with no warning or introduction, Powers places the reader in a *mise en scène* wherein roles are different than the ones we are accustomed to: a human being is silently listening to trees which are eloquent

¹ D. Haraway, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chtulucene: Making Kin*, "Environmental Humanities" vol. 6, 2015, p. 160.

² U. K. Le Guin, *Deep in Admiration*, [in] A. Tsing, H. Swanson, E. Gan and N. Bubandt (eds.), "Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Monsters of the Anthropocene," University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2017, p. 16.

³ R. Powers, *The Overstory*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 2018.

⁴ U. K. Le Guin, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

and garrulous, offering shrewd perceptions on their environment and the relations that prevail in it. These observations are not conveyed in a human language, the woman only translates their semiosis into words. What emerges in this scene is a new vision of mind and language, one that questions the idea of Eurocentric Enlightenment human exceptionalism and opens up a discussion on more-than-human agencies. Rather than propagating the vision of human as the only rational, self-conscious, language bound thing⁵, a vision which contributed to the growing ecological crisis, in this novel Powers draws from the latest research in plant life and overturns the perception of plant life as insentient, passive and mute. The novel's focus on language and communication compels a renewed understanding of the way meaning is produced, who or what participates in its production, and what counts as semiosis. These shifts in the portrayal of human and nonhuman protagonists pose ethical, political and social questions that posthumanist thinkers have been debating, especially in the past two decades.

The world of plants has long been elusive for scientists and philosophers and relegated to a separate domain of nature, against which the human could create a self-image of higher perfectibility. In fact, Western philosophy, since Greek Neoplatonism, has placed all beings in the hierarchical universe in which inanimate beings belonged at the bottom and were followed by those viewed as gradually more complex. Plants were placed just above the inanimate beings and below animals and humans, they were perceived thus as inferior to them. They were "imperfect" because they seemed to be ontologically "lacking the characteristics that render animals superior, including movement, intentionality, or the ability to communicate."⁶ This hierarchy enabled a view of humans a separate from nature. As defined by Immanuel Kant, the human is separate and distinguished from the world in of itself (that is noumena or nature) by possessing critical self-awareness, rationality and language (phenomena/ culture) that nature is deprived of.⁷ Both the idea of human separation from nature and monopoly on language and communication have since been undercut.

In his attempt to diagnose the cause for our reductive view of plants, Michael Marder points to our inability to imagine space and time from their perspective. James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler propose another phenomenon to explain this lack of concern — "plant blindness," that is, the "inability to see or notice plants in one's own environment" which then

⁵ M. Jackson, *Coloniality, Ontology, and the Question of the Posthuman*, Routledge, London and New York, 2018, p. 29.

⁶ M. Gagliano, *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2017, p. ix.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

leads to our “inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs.”⁸ The present situation, in which one in five species is facing extinction⁹, though, has encouraged a renewed interest in other than human world, including the disappearing vegetal life.

In order to underline various aspects and causes of today’s environmental condition, many posthumanist scholars and social scientists have popularized terms such as the Anthropocene, Capitalocene or Plantationocene. Donna Haraway, Jason W. Moore and Anna Tsing, among others, blame massive extraction under capitalism for destroying the planet’s remaining refugias for both human and the more than human critters. Anna Tsing recognizes that events such as, for example, clear-cutting, upset the possibility to reconstitute rich multispecies assemblages.¹⁰ Jason W. Moore, the propagator, along with Andreas Malm, of the term Capitalocene, likewise notices that earth’s resources have been exhausted and “cheap nature is at an end.”¹¹ By way of solution, Donna Haraway proposes to name our epoch the more affirmative Chtulucene — a term that negates the Enlightenment humanist nature/culture, human/ non-human distinctions and focuses, instead, on the flourishing of multispecies assemblages in multiple spatialities and temporalities.¹² She thus shifts the focus from diagnosing the causes towards providing solution — an understanding of our mutual entanglement and co-dependence on one another, human and non-human. Haraway says: “the stretch and recomposition of kin are allowed by the fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is last time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages.”¹³ As boundaries of kinship open up, the practice of care is more likely to be extended to the more-than-human world. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, in her *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*, notices the need to expand the definition of care in today’s ethics wherein care is still identified “with matters pertaining to the ‘private’ life of humans as individuals.”¹⁴ Humans are not the only species that matter and not the only one which is characterized by agency and liveliness. There

⁸ J. H. Wandersee, E. E. Schussler, *Preventing Plant Blindness*, “American Biology Teacher” vol. 61, no. 2, Feb. 1999, p. 82.

⁹ M. Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013.

¹⁰ Quot. in: D. Haraway, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

¹¹ J. W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and Accumulation of Capital*, Verso, London, New York, 2015, p. 292.

¹² D. Haraway, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁴ M. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2017, p. 139.

is thus a need to commit to ecological practices that, even if performed individually, do not aim at self-care but are instead collective and always aware of possible relationalities. In eliminating the hierarchical division between humans and more-than-human world, and recognizing mutual entanglements, these posthumanist thinkers find a way forward towards a more-sustainable cohabitation.

Not only the distinction between humans and more-than-human has been challenged but also what is considered life and nonlife is being radically reformulated today. Povinelli writes about it in terms of biopower giving way to geontopower.¹⁵ That is, biopower - the concept that makes life itself the central locus of political governance and operates through the tactics of death by indicating which forms have the right to live — is no longer seen as adequate. Jeffrey Nealon in *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life*¹⁶ shows, for example, the way it narrows down the concept of life to animal life while plants and other forms are not considered in the equation. Geontopower (the power of and over nonlife), is in turn concerned not with life and death distinction but with life and nonlife. Agreeing with Eduardo Kohn's ideas in *How Forests Think*, Povinelli specifies that what differentiates life from nonlife is semiosis. She writes: “[a]ll living things are like us, if we understand that our dominant mode of semiosis, language, is just one of many kinds of semiosis,”¹⁷ linguistically based communication is no longer the norm.

The liveliness of “the things we observe and with which we interact”¹⁸ is likewise connected with semiosis by the material ecocritic, Serpil Opperman. She writes that they are “alive and undeniably expressive. They have their own stories to tell, showing how nature enacts entanglement . . . for storying the world is also a process of relation-making.”¹⁹ Opperman eliminates the mind/matter distinction believing that “material phenomena are not isolable from semiotic processes and that matter can be creatively expressive in bearing material stories about ecological crises interlaced with socio-political struggles and geophysical forces.”²⁰ Plants, substances, elements, forms of animate and inanimate life are all expressive material

¹⁵ E. A. Povinelli, *Geontologies. A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 4.

¹⁶ J. Nealon, *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2016.

¹⁷ E. A. Povinelli, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

¹⁸ S. Opperman, *The Scale of the Anthropocene. Material Ecocritical Reflections*, “Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature” no. 3:51, 2018, p. 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10

agencies. Oppermann believes that if we ask the right questions about their constitutive narratives, i.e. if we consider all matter as storied matter, we can change the habitual perceptions of nature being an inexhaustible resource for our utilitarian purposes and challenge the cultural dominants such as capitalism or humanism.

Giving vegetal life a voice is, however, a challenge to a writer of fiction. While it is easier to find animal narrators, plants have been rare and their role has been, mostly, symbolic and intended to express human affairs or to create a mood for the plot. The biggest difficulty is in showing them as social actors in their situated assemblages and not reducing them to anthropomorphic representations of what can be knowable to the human author/reader. Richard Powers's *The Overstory* may be read as an experiment in carrying this possibility forward.

The action of the novel takes place across decades in the lives of nine human protagonists who become involved in various ways in the 1990 Redwood Summer in California — an environmental movement protesting against the clear-cutting of old-growth redwood trees which was part of Timber Wars that lasted throughout that decade. By then, the Sequoia sempervirens trees, which dated up to over 2 000 years, constituted only a minor percentage (c. 3%) of the old growth forest that used to cover the US territory. The human protagonists come from widely disparate backgrounds and are initially seemingly unconcerned about the matters beyond their personal affairs. As the story progresses, however, they all become passionately engaged in protecting the remaining primal forests to the point of being ready to sacrifice their own lives. From the start of the novel, human protagonists are accompanied by trees that come to the foreground and their stories form the focal point in the narrative. In an interview with Everett Hamner, Powers admitted that his wish was to make all the main characters trees, and yet such act of identification remained beyond his power as a novelist.²¹ Instead, the novel addresses the ontological question of what constitutes the subject and it metafictionally debates the importance of human and nonhuman storytelling in preserving healthy habitats for all species.

Powers continuously blurs the boundary that separates human and nonhuman protagonists and removes the ontological and epistemological superiority of one over the other. The dendrologist, Patricia, who in the novel serves as a conduit for all the latest advances in science and whose book *The Secret Forest* is a fictional counterpart of the bestselling *The Hidden Lives of Trees* (2015) by Peter Wohlleben, notices that, in comparison to the

²¹ E. Hamner, *Here's to Unsuicide: An Interview with Richard Powers*, "Los Angeles Review of Books" April 2018. Accessed at www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/heres-to-unsuicide-an-interview-with-richard-powers/#!

two large steps in the evolution of life on earth, “one that took inert matter over the crest of life, and the one that led from simple bacteria to compound cells a hundred times larger and more complex,”²² the gap separating trees and men is minor. In her book, she writes: “You and the tree in your backyard come from the same ancestor ... you still share a quarter of your genes.”²³ In fact, technological developments in the twenty and twenty-first century have revolutionalized our understanding of evolution and debunked the metaphor of the hierarchical tree of life. The German entomologist Willi Hennig developed cladistics that allow “to order animals in a system according to their genealogy,”²⁴ that is particular clades group together species that originate from a common ancestor. This theory advanced with the ability to see DNA and RNA sequences and the resultant genealogical cladistics draw attention to the ongoing changes of all organisms, deconstruct the hierarchical ordering of beings and stress the relatedness of organisms.²⁵

The boundary separating human and nonhuman world is also shown not to be universally valid. Patricia notices that, in some indigenous beliefs eg. of the Achuar people in Brazil, trees are our “kin, with hopes, fears, and social codes.”²⁶ She draws attention to the genetic and also emotional and social similarities believing that this will inspire humans to be more caring and conscious in their contact with plants. In Donna Haraway’s words, such “stretching and recomposition of kin”²⁷ will allow humans to “practice better care of kinds-as assemblages.”²⁸

The crossing of the man/ plant distinction in the novel is a two-way process: human protagonists assume tree properties while trees are shown to possess the qualities and values typically reserved for humans. As a young girl, Patricia becomes fascinated with the tales in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in which men change into trees: Daphne into a bay laurel, women killers of Orpheus grow roots, boy Cyparissus and Myrrha become plants named after them, and the old couple, Baucis and Philemon, are rewarded for their hospitality by becoming an oak and a linden. Likewise, each chapter in Part One introducing separate characters is accompanied by a 19th-century botanical engraving

²² R. Powers, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

²⁴ A. Hejnol, *Ladders, Trees, Complexity and other Metaphors in Evolutionary Thinking*, [in:] A. Tsing, H. Swanson, E. Gan, N. Bubandt (eds.), “Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene,” Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p. 90.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

²⁷ D. Haraway, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

portraying a kind of tree with which that person will become in various ways identified and connected, including, among others, an oak, beech, ginkgo biloba, maple, pine and mulberry. For example, when Ray, a junior intellectual property lawyer falls in love and together with his girlfriend plays the role Macduff (a man who had to play a tree) in a community performance of *Macbeth*, he senses an internal transformation into an oak tree: “Something is happening to me. Something heavy, huge and slow, coming from far outside, that I do not understand.” The narrator elaborates:

The thing that comes for him is a genus more than six hundred species strong. . . . Thick, clotted, craggy, but solid on the earth, and covered in other living things. . . . The oaks swear him in as temporary deputy in their fight against the human monster.²⁹

Like an oak, Ray forms the solid backbone of his marriage with Dorothy, he survives her temperamental fits and infidelities and, even after becoming bedridden by a stroke, allows her to find peace and a sense of home. Dorothy, in turn, is associated with linden —

. . . a radical tree, as different from an oak as a woman is from a man, . . . its flowers and tiny hard fruit hang down from surfboard bracts whose sole perverse purpose seem to be to state its own singularity.³⁰

Just like the fruit does not seem to serve its biological purpose of reproduction, Dorothy will find out she is infertile.

Conversely, in a mirror reflection of the novel’s human protagonists, trees are shown as full-fledged actors in Patricia’s book:

. . . she spins short biographies of her favourite characters: loner trees, cunning trees, sages and solid citizens, trees that are impulsive or shy or generous. . . . This is not our world with trees in it. It’s a world of trees, where humans have just arrived.³¹

In her research, she proves that they are capable of agency and intentionality. She writes: “Join enough living things together, through the air and underground, and you wind up with something that has *intention*. Forest. A threatened creature.”³² Then, at another place, she elaborates: “A forest knows things. They wire themselves underground. There are brains down there, ones that our brains aren’t shaped to see. Root plasticity, solving problems and making decisions. Fungal synapses. What else do you want to call it? Link

²⁹ R. Powers, op. cit., pp. 66-67.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

³¹ Ibid., p. 424.

³² Ibid., pp. 283-284, emphasis original.

enough trees together, and a forest grows *aware*.”³³ “The ‘environment’ is alive — a fluid, changing web of purposeful lives dependent on each other.”³⁴ Not only humans have consciousness. The forest in the novel is aware, it has intentionality, and a mind of its own. It seems necessary thus to rethink the very emergence of mind. Mark Jackson argues that it “is not peculiar to humans or complex cognitive apparatuses. Instead, it is an emergent property of semiotic processes” that is “the relational dynamics of enduring material systems.”³⁵ As Kohn says: “Signs don’t come from the mind. Rather, it is the other way around. What we call mind, or self, is a product of semiosis.”³⁶ That means that signs emerge in relational assemblages, and in this way create the conditions for the emergence of mind. Mind is thus the property of all life and, possibly, non-life³⁷ and it is closely interlinked with semiosis. Patricia, who since childhood has been suffering from speech impairment, early in her academic career makes a far-reaching at the time discovery of tree communication. She discovers that trees alert one another of danger by means of biochemical signaling: “They’re linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system across acres of woodland. These brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other.”³⁸

Given that the majority of protagonists are trees, the reader might expect to hear their voice in the novel. In “To Hear Plants Speak” Michal Marder asks questions debating the feasibility of such an enterprise:

What kind of hearing must we resort to and what sort of speech corresponds to it? How to translate the language, or the languages, of plants into terms that are intelligible within the scope of our human languages? . . . What are the conditions of possibility for a cross-kingdoms translation and what is the place of the untranslatable in it?³⁹

Marder suggests redefining the very concept of language so as not to remain in the confines of the anthropocentric prejudice that places human language and intelligence as the standard model. Marder stresses the need to open up to other possibilities, outside of the purely human enunciation. He enumerates

³³ Ibid., p. 453.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 454.

³⁵ M. Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

³⁶ E. Kohn, *How Forests Think. Towards an Anthropology beyond the Human*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 2013, p. 34, quot. in: M. Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

³⁷ M. Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

³⁸ R. Powers, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

³⁹ M. Marder, *To Hear Plants Speak*, [in:] M. Gagliano (ed.), “The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature,” University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2017, p. 103.

three strategies used by authors so far: the symbolic dimension, mechanisms of expression and articulation; and the material-substantive aspect of vegetal biosemiotics.⁴⁰ On the symbolic level, a plant refers to something other than itself, there is thus a separation from the material reality of the plant. In the second case, plants are given anthropomorphic features, including the ability to speak, like mythical or religious trees, and Tolkien's Ents. Unlike in the symbolic dimension, here plants are given voice; vocalization is, however, in itself an aspect of human communication. Language is, then, associated with the voice that only humans possess, "the silence of vegetal life . . . is broken and disrespected"⁴¹ and the language of plants is denied its existence prior to being given the human voice. Marder argues the most ethical way to give a literary representation of a talking tree is to make the characters listen to the sounds that the plants' material presence produces: the rustling of leaves, the movement of branches in the wind, etc. We can find it in *The Overstory* when, for example, one of the protagonists watches as "the spruces pour out messages in media of their own invention. They speak through their needles, trunks and roots. They record in their own bodies the history of every crisis they've lived through."⁴² The third aspect of plant communication that Marder identifies is material-substantive communication. It overcomes the pitfalls of ascribing symbolic meanings to vegetal life and anthropomorphizing them by giving them the human voice. The advances in the science of biochemical substances and electrical signaling which form a plant's life activity allow us to better understand the way plants receive and emit information. This is Patricia's main research field — the mycorrhizal underground networks and airborne biochemical signals. However, limiting our understanding to this view would still be reductive. Language is more than transmitting information. That is why Marder eventually defines plant language as "an articulation without saying,"⁴³ that is a language which is not verbal but material: plants articulate their material presence as they grow, while remaining rooted underground they expose themselves to our sensorial perception; they form the world by which they are themselves shaped — they are thus deeply relational — this is why the closer humans articulate actual existence, the more our languages resemble those of plants. Marder concludes that it is only after we abandon our dreams of perfect transparency of plant language that we can fully encounter other-than-human beings without anthropomorphizing them.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 104.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 113.

⁴² R. Powers, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

⁴³ M. Marder, *op. cit.*, 2017, p. 119.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 123.

While Marder stresses the materiality of plant language but allows and even encourages its opacity, Iovino and Opperman propose material narrativity as a way of grappling imaginatively with the distant to a human experience life of vegetal agentic beings capable of producing their own stories.⁴⁵ There is a strong emphasis on materiality and its potential to carry stories. One obvious storytelling mode a tree performs is in the form and shape of its rings. After pine trees in a park have been logged down, Douglas Pavlicek, a war veteran who earns a living by planting trees, bends down to read a fresh stump: “The years roll away under his fingers — their floods and droughts, their cold spells and scorched seasons all written into varying rings.”⁴⁶ Erin James argues that tree rings, being a sequence of events, fit the definition of a simple narrative, and that trees are capable of narrating their own stories but they are a less complex kind of narrative lacking such elements as, for example, focalization, metanarration or heteroglossia, they are also incapable of altering the chronology of events.⁴⁷ Even in the seeming simplicity, however, the ring stories may remain mysterious and inaccessible to the human *reader*. When one of the protagonists lands in prison with a penalty of a double life sentence for his activism during the Redwood Summer, he tries to read the pattern in the wooden desk:

It shocks him to realize, after a lifetime of looking at wood: He’s staring at the seasons, the year’s pendulum, the burst of spring and the enfolding of fall, the beat of a two-four song recorded here, in a medium that the piece itself created. . . . And still he is illiterate. . . . If he could read, if he could translate.⁴⁸

There remains an impassable communication barrier between vegetal and human interlocutors which speaks in favour of the trees — it signifies that meaning originates not in the human mind but outside of its reach - in the nonhuman subjects who can thus no longer be objectified.

Acknowledging that plants are capable of creating their own stories, that they possess agency and intentionality may also have political, social and legal implications— it may change their status from property to personhood. Ray is reading passages from Christopher D. Stone’s 1972 “Should Trees Have Standing:”

⁴⁵ S. Iovino, S. Opperman, *Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych*, “ISLE” vol. 19, no. 3, 2012, p. 468.

⁴⁶ R. Powers, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

⁴⁷ E. James, *What the Plant Says*, M. Gagliano (ed.), *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2017, pp. 267.

⁴⁸ R. Powers, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

Children, women, slaves, aboriginals, the ill, insane, the disabled: all changed. Unthinkably, over the centuries, into persons by the law. So why shouldn't trees and eagles and rivers and living mountains be able to sue humans for theft and endless damages?⁴⁹

One obvious answer would be that they cannot voice their right in court. However, as Stone argues, "Corporations cannot speak, either; nor can states, estates, incompetents, municipalities, or universities. Lawyers speak for them."⁵⁰ Like the 20th century subalterns before them, trees and other elements of the environment like parks or rivers, are slowly becoming recognized in courts around the world and protected from exploitation. This situation produces its own paradoxes which are a topic for a different paper altogether, yet it is certain that if we consider mind and life not as hierarchically organized but rather as a web of relations, then the political conceptions must necessarily change. Posthumanist theories are actively seeking to reach beyond the narratives of human exceptionalism in the direction of material relationalities to redefine what counts as political.

Ray spends the last few decades of his life in bed, paralysed, observing through the window the movement of trees he and Dorothy had planted. After years of craving a child of their own, they decide to adopt a chestnut tree in their garden as their daughter, literally making kin across species. Soon afterwards he dies and Dorothy reads a passage from *Metamorphoses* on *xenia* — guest friendship — a command to take care of travelling strangers. This is a story about Baucis and Philemon who alone open their door to two strangers — immortals who come to Earth in disguise. They are rewarded by being turned into two intertwined trees, an oak and a linden. The passage concludes: "What we *care* for, we will grow to resemble. And what we resemble will hold us, when we are us no longer."⁵¹ The boundary separating the two kinds, trees and humans, ultimately disappears.

To conclude, Patricia's husband notices at one point "how few things man is really the measure of. And he's as generous and eager as weeds."⁵² The novel presents a new cosmology — one of relations rather than hierarchies where the grounds for human exceptionalism have been deconstructed in concurrence with developments in plant science and philosophy and asks questions about the ethical and political rights of the nonhuman world. It breaks the convention of following the story of an individual protagonist

⁴⁹ R. Powers, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

⁵⁰ Ch. D. Stone, *Should Trees have Standing? — Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects*, "Southern California Law Review" 45, 1972, p. 464.

⁵¹ R. Powers, *op. cit.*, p. 499, emphasis mine.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

in his or her self-development and focuses on multispecies encounters, communication, and care. It is most successful where it attempts to give narratorial space to plant articulation in a way that has not been attempted before, avoiding the anthropomorphizing pitfalls of previous literary presentations of plant communication. There is a place for the untranslatable and indiscernible in this exchange which further underlines the mindfulness of the vegetal matter.

One of the Redwood Summer activists in the novel says “The best arguments in the world won’t change a person’s mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story.”⁵³ Whether the novel is successful in creating an interesting, involving narrative out of the polyphony or, rather more accurately, a cacophony of voices, both vocal and silent, is a question that the reader needs to answer on their own. What is certain, it offers a powerful incentive to make kin in the park, in the forest, and even in one’s study with the vegetal life that we are caring for with better or worse results.

Patrycja Austin

A Rustling in *The Overstory*: More-Than-Human Storytelling in Richard Powers’s Novel

Abstract

This paper analyses the way Richard Powers portrays plant life in his 2018 novel *The Overstory*. Unlike in traditional literary depictions of botany, trees are presented as actors and not passive objects. By undermining the mind/ matter, human/ nonhuman distinctions Powers reduces the gap separating his human protagonists and trees. The latter have agency, intentionality and the ability to communicate. Powers also attempts to find a new way to give his vegetal life voice. Instead of anthropomorphizing them, plants talk in their own material way. This paper draws from posthumanist writings by, among others, Donna Haraway Anna Tsing Lowenhaupt, Mark Jackson, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, and also from Michael Marder’s and Serpil Opperman’s ideas on plant language and storytelling.

Keywords: Plant language, posthumanism, Richard Powers, mind and matter.

⁵³R. Powers, *op. cit.*, p. 336.