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# FOLIAGE TAPESTRY ECONARRATIVES IN RICHARD POWERS'S THE OVERSTORY

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## Abstract

At a time when climate change and all its relevant issues have become of paramount importance, the novel form, and particularly econarratives, came under the scrutinizing lens of ecocritics who claimed the form's inability to adequately express such vital issues. This paper applies the concepts of "weird narratology" (John Hegg Lund 2020) and "structural coupling" (Per Israelson and Jesper Olsson 2024) to analyze Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), demonstrating how he surpasses these ecocritical concerns by creating a multimodal, multilayered econarrative that manages to cater to its target in arboreal defense, without falling into the trap of Anthropocentrism.

## ملخص البحث:

يواجه البناء الأدبي الروائي، وبخاصة السرد البيئي، اتهامات بعدم قدرته على التعبير عن مشكلات التغير المناخي وقضاياها التي تشغل العالم الآن. هذا البحث يثبت استطاعة ريتشارد باورز، في روايته "القصة الأهم" (٢٠١٨)، أن يقدم نموذج بناء سردي بيئي يفند هذه الاتهامات النقدية البيئية، بتطبيق مفاهيم "البناء السردى الغريب" (جون هاجلند ٢٠٢٠) و "ازدواجية البناء السردى" (نير ازاريلسون و جيسبير أولسون ٢٠٢٤)، دون الوقوع في فخاخ السرد المنبثق عن "حقبة التأثير البشرى".

## Introduction:

In 2018, Richard Powers published his Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The Overstory*—hailed as “a book about the wisdom of trees” by Benjamin Markovits ; “a paean to the grandeur and wonder of trees” by Alexander Larman ; and in the words of Nathaniel Rich, a work “on the greatest existential crisis human civilization faces: the destruction of the natural conditions necessary for our own survival,” by providing, as Garrat Stewart puts it, “answers to the envioning field of narrative action, and forest activism, across eight different biographical plotlines in the novel’s convergent cast of characters” (1).

The defense of arboreal rights is indeed at the heart of *The Overstory*; and at the time that Powers published the book, debates concerning issues of ecocriticism were taking center stage; particularly those of questioning the capacity of econarrative texts to properly represent the complexities of the natural world and the challenges posed to it by the Anthropocene.

Critics of *The Overstory* have focused on how Powers gave subjectivity to trees through a study of focalization in the narrative (Dahy 2022), on how collective agency of trees and fungi is represented (Lambert 2021), on the connections between the text and real-life botanical science (Ostalska 2022), and on the work as a cultural study of climate change (Otjen 2022) or an environmental study (Gandotra and Argawal 2020).

This paper considers *The Overstory* from a different standpoint. Namely, through applying the concepts of “weird narratology” (Hegg Lund 2020) and “structural coupling” (Israelson and Olsson 2024) to the novel, this paper shows how Powers creates a narrative ecology whose foliage, human, and nonhuman agents come together to defy anthropocentric attitudes, without falling into its traps.

## Ecocriticism and the Novel:

### Weird Narratives and Structural Coupling

Coined by William Ruckert in 1979, ecocriticism, Greg Garrad explains, has gone through three ‘waves’ of development. The first, in the 1990s, helped create a cannon for ecocriticism within mainstream critical theory; though it only focused on seeking ways to protect Nature from human malpractices, and hailed science as a better model of representing the nonhuman. The second wave stressed the intrarelations between human and nonhuman entities, widened the scope of texts to be included within this specific cannon, and created works more attached to issues of the environmental justice movement. Since the early

years of the second millennium, the third wave of ecocriticism recognizes “ethnic and national particularities yet transcend ethnic and national boundaries” (Garrad 1). Ecocritics of this third wave are assigned by Garrad the task of tying “their analyses explicitly to a “green” moral and political agenda” (qtd. in Clark 3).

For Timothy Clark, ecocritics should focus on understanding “human abuse of the natural world”, which he explains as “the corollary of unjust or oppressive systems of government and economics, and forms of social organizations (hierarchy, plutocracy, patriarchy) that both abuse other human beings and which have no hesitation taking a similar stance towards anything else” (3). For ecocritics, then, cultural change can be affected by changing the way people think, through “green” works of ecoactivism.

This focus on the relationship between Man and Nature in literary works is nothing new. What shifted, though, with time, is the move from the prophet-like, spiritually-gifted Romantic “nature-reader” poet, to the Colonial condescending of an Imperial child giving “a bun to the elephant” (Milne 46); and then, within posthuman theory (that is, the line of thought suspicious of human individualism and autonomy, viewing humans as another animal species that depends on other living beings for survival), to the complete erosion of the human/nonhuman boundary—the depletion of the notion of the Other into sameness, and even into human dependency upon the nonhuman for existence.

Yet it is precisely this attempt at blurring the human/nonhuman boundary that critics have often doubted an econarrative would be able to perform, without falling into the trap of being self-contradictory. That is, since traditional narratives are often based upon a human understanding and perception of the world, including material and nonhuman objects, then the storyworld created in such narratives would essentially represent the anthropocentric attitudes that ecocriticism has set out to undermine and decenter.

One major obstacle here, Timothy Clark argues, is the disparity between human timescales needed for character affirmation, as opposed to the enormously unequal timescales of the Anthropocene; as this would render properly representing environmental issues an almost impossible task:

Given that the novel as a genre tends overwhelmingly to focus on stories of individual growth or dramas of consciousness, crises of identity or of relationships, etc., questions must arise on the limits of what may seem the form’s built-in individualistic stance, its reinforcing the privilege of the immediate human scale as the main and even exclusive reality. (103)

Monika Fludernik also expresses her concern over traditional narrative forms being able to represent environmental issues. She claims the novel form has “its ‘anthropomorphic bias’: namely, narrative’s tendency to foreground human protagonists, psychological causality, and human-scale temporality and spatiality” (2). In the same vein, Erin James, citing Colebrook’s *Death of the PostHuman*, argues that “narrative is intimately tied to human perspectives and, as such, cannot adequately represent the broader timescales and wider conception of non-human lives that our current moment of environmental crisis demands” (*Environment and Narrative* 184).

To address these challenges, in 2015, Erin James coined the term econarratology, as a critical approach “studying the relationship between literature and the physical environment [...] with sensitivity to the literary structures and devices that we use to communicate” (*Storyworld Accord* 23). Five years later, she joins Eric Morel in surveying critical attempts at econarratological analysis, including John Heggund’s “weird narratology”, who explains it as the study of “narratives that foreground a blurring between narrative agents and material

entities or environments—whether this blurring is visible at the level of discourse, story, or [...] both” (Hegglund 34).

To produce this boundary-blurring effect, Hegglund proposes an “object-oriented plotting”, that is, narratives “in which an object takes center stage [...] and partly pushes plot beyond its anthropocentric comfort zone” (46). The cause-and-effect factors in such a plot would be so “loosened” in order to “displace narrative’s bias toward human interaction”; and this strategy would complicate “the narrative’s temporality through non-linear structures” (47)—multiple narrative lines would thus emerge and then coalesce to underline the text’s overall message.

This coalescence is what Israelsen and Olsson call “structural coupling”, where a narrative text’s meaning is formed

by the relation between narrative systems such as characters, perspectives, chronotopes, and diegetic levels, to mention a few. A meaningful structure in a narrative text—a pattern of recognized meaning—is created as different narrative systems are coupled to each other. Meaning and structure is in this sense dynamic and emergent. (209)

The created dynamics here can only be the result of what Timothy Morton sees “as a collaboration between humanity and nonhumanity” in an econarrative text. He explains that “[t]his does not mean that humans are in charge of creating work *about* nonhumanity—as if above their nonhuman counterparts—instead, it means that humans create *with* nonhumanity”; a “coexistence without an agenda” (4). For Strengers, too, econarratives are successful if they manage “to compose” in a way that “couples together multiple, divergent struggles” (qtd. in Morton 4-5).

### ***The Overstory: Narrative Ecology***

In *The Overstory*, initially, two narratives gradually emerge: one by Man, of men and trees; and the other by trees, on the ways they give life, feed other beings, propel action, provide inspiration, and save lives. Yet, a third narrative joins in near the end of the novel; that of “the learners” (*Overstory* 608)—the multi-billion digits that haunt the world of the Web, nudged into creation by Neelay Mehta and other worldwide coders. This new species at first “observes”, “reads”, and “listens” to humans; as well as analyze, collect, map, and chart any photo, drawing, or graph ever made or taken of trees. Its own narrative will then be based on “translating” the language of humans to trees and vice versa (*Overstory* 617).

In form, the novel follows the botanic structure of a tree, as it progresses through large narrative parts entitled “ROOTS”, “TRUNK”, “CROWN”, and “SEEDS”; respectively. Each of these begins with a kind of prologue that foreshadows events or scenes to come. The first one is about a woman, unnamed, leaning against a pine, named, tree. The same scene repeats near the end of the novel, with the woman named, and “altered”: Prophecies of what the world will go through because of human consumption-based practices are listed in the “messages” Mimi Ma’s “greener mind” receives from the pine tree against which she leans—the final part of the “thing” she was asked to “listen to” at the very first page of the first part in the book (*Overstory* 621-622).

“ROOTS” gives the biographies and lineage of the major nine human characters. Yet, unlike traditional narration where human life, or rather, the events the characters go through, might be reflected on changes or conditions of the landscape or the natural world; here, it is the other way round: Through narrating the birth, growth, and life of the Hoel chestnut tree, the lives of the Hoel family members, and even of those of neighboring farmers, are presented as echoes, shadows, or “effects” of the presence and life of the tree:

John Hoel buries his father beneath the chestnut the man planted [...] The tree above cast its shade with equal generosity on the living and the dead. The trunk has grown too thick for John to embrace. The lowest skirt of surviving branches lifts out of reach. (*Overstory* 11)

Quite often, the complexity of tree structure, details of its metabolism and life-giving abilities, are compared to those of hardly-equal human ones: Nicholas Hoel, the artist, wonders “what his brain would have to be like to distinguish each of the hundreds of lancet leaves on a given branch and recognize them as easily as he did the faces of his cousins” (*Overstory* 22).

The lives of the other eight human characters are also shaped by or at least compared to those of trees: In Midwest Illinois, Mimi Ma is traumatized by the suicide of her father, whose life in the US begins, blossoms, and ends with the mulberry tree he planted in his backyard. To the east, in North Carolina, the thoughts of Adam Appich, as he grows up, continuously compare humans to trees and other natural creatures. On a theatrical stage somewhere, Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly bond during the performance of a play in which Ray poses as an oak tree. Later, the couple plant a tree in their garden for every marital anniversary. In Vietnam, Douglas Pavlicek is saved by a banyan tree after falling from his burning war plane. Back in the States, the Indian-American child Neelay Mehta is “betrayed” by an encina tree and becomes crippled. Partially deaf Patricia Westerford becomes a renowned botanist; and Olivia Vandergriff, senior college student, starts hearing arboreal messages from “beings of light”, after miraculously surviving accidental electrocution.

Like an aspen stand where individual trees are connected through their roots over long distances, the second part of the book, “TRUNK”, brings the dispersed human characters together, through acts of green activism. Five characters take part in green protests that end badly; but almost all characters come across Dr. Patricia Westerford’s *The Secret Forest*; in which she proves that trees could “talk”. The prologue here shows an unnamed imprisoned man, trying to decipher a tree’s biological history by tracing the rings on the surface of his wooden desk:

Trees have landed him here. Trees and too much love of them. He still can’t say how wrong he was, or whether he’d choose to be so wrong again. The only *text* that can answer that question spreads, unreadable, under his hands. (*Overstory* 194; italics mine)

As with the previous part, “TRUNK” is not divided into chapters, but into narrative sections separated by the small image of a ringed cross-section from a tree trunk; as if each trunk cross-section, with its bio-temporal rings is telling the history of the human characters as they collide with histories of trees. Near the end of this part, the green activists sat together around a fire,

And for half the night, *the characters* sit around the blaze, *laughing* and *listening* and *whispering* and *baying* at the moon up in the spruces’ spires. (*Overstory* 420; italics mine)

As trees and humans come closer together, it is increasingly unclear who are the “characters” in whose “story”—the lines between human and nonhuman narratives are blurred.

The prologue to “CROWN” follows the inner monologue of an unnamed man lying in a tent in the woods and musing on the best way to describe spruce tree tops through comparisons to man-made items. The spruces, he “hears”, admonish him:

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*Likeness is the sole problem of men. But the spruces poor 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. The man in the tent lies bathed in signals of years older than his crude senses. And still he can read them. (Overstory 443)*

The anthropocentric human attitude towards the nonhuman is thus bluntly thwarted; and as this part progresses, again through narrative sections without dividing markers save a short blank space—trees' creativity and their equal footing as God's creations are expressed in no unclear terms: Shortly into the part, the man in the tent, Nicholas Hoel, listens to the "choir" of the spruce trees as they sing: "*Let the field be joyful and all that is therein. Then shall all the trees of the world rejoice*" (Overstory 456). The quote from Psalm 96:12 "calls for creation to rejoice, highlighting the exuberant joy that should accompany God's sovereign reign" (blessing.com). The biblical text chose trees to refer to all creation, stressing their almost-superior status.

In "TRUNK", trees "rewrite" human personalities. The second client at Mimi Ma's mental health therapy office, standing outside on the pavement, looks at a tree; and "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" (Overstory 506; italics mine). Dorothy Brinkman mentally constructs a comparison between dramatic narratives and the lives of trees. Scanning a book on types of trees, she "remembers now why she never had the patience for nature. No drama, no development, no colliding hopes and fears. Branching, tangled, messy plots. And she couldn't keep the *characters* straight" (Overstory 523-524; italics mine).

Arboreal narratives are far more complex than those of humans, and cannot be held comparable to their anthropocentric counterparts. The dramatic narrative created by trees is witnessed by Ray Brinkman as he sits, paralyzed, gazing unto his backyard garden-turned-forest:

A shrub he and Dorothy must have put in years ago is clumping in shaggy yellow flowers, even with all its leaves long dead. High drama to paralytic. The wind throws out gossip; the branches of the Brinkman anniversary plantings wave, scandalized. There is danger everywhere, reediness, intrigue, slow-motion, rising action [...] symphonic narrative mayhem plays out all around them [...] Civilized yards are all alike. Every wild yard is wild in its own way. (Overstory 478-479)

The narratives created by "the wild yards" are endless, rich, and too complex for man to understand without effort. Yet the point is that trees do have stories that must be told and must be listened to by humans, regardless of their complexities.

Dr. Patricia Westerford tries to push this need forward. As she "spins short biographies of her favorite [tree] characters", she thinks of the ways humans and arboreal characters can co-create in order to co-exist:

*How fine it would be if we could learn who they are, when they're at their best. She tries to turn the story on its head. This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived. (Overstory 530)*

The first step towards a prosperous co-existence is to admit that without the narratives of trees, human narratives would not be possible.

The final part in the novel, “SEEDS”, begins with a prologue telling the story of Earth as imagined in only one day. And by the end of the book, as Olivia, Patricia, Douglas, Dennis, and Ray Brinkman are now dead, and while Adam is imprisoned, Dorothy and Mimi are each left old and lonely. Nicholas Hoel comes to realize two facts as he remembers Olivia’s words: “the most wonderful things” that need help are humans, not trees; because it is trees that give life to humans. He also realizes that forests, trees, and plants, “*what we have been given. What we must earn. This will never end*” (*Overstory* 625).

The interaction that Israelson and Olsson say is important for the structural coupling needed in ecocritical works—here, the relation between the narrative systems of arboreal and human characters—depends on swiping representational tools. In *The Overstory*, tree responses, behavior, and “communication” are presented in human terms, not by anthropomorphic means, but specifically as all manners of inventing, creating, and particularly, writing: Professor Westerford’s team come across 213 different species of trees,

each one a product of the Earth *thinking* aloud [...] Thousands of *ingenious* kinds of trees spread up the branching river basin. Any of these disappearing chemical factories might *make* the next HIV-block, the next super-antibiotic, the newest tumor killer. (*Overstory* 487; italics mine)

Human creativity, on the other hand, is narrated in arboreal terms. Contemplating the calm temperament of Dennis, her husband, Patricia reflects that “in his spare motions and abundant silence, he blurs the line between those nearly identical molecules, chlorophyll and hemoglobin” (*Overstory* 180). Douglas Pavlicek writes down a diary of his green activism days with Olivia, Mimi, Nick, and Adam—a “Manifestation of Failure”, “passion everywhere, and bursting with details, but without much structure. His words just *branch* and *bud* and *branch* again” (*Overstory* 481; italics mine).

As the creative product of mediators and “translators”, the narrative of the new species, “the learners”, can only be explained by setting off arboreal against human terms. The “new creations” collect data in order to devise ways “for people to unsuicide” (*Overstory* 600): As Mimi Ma sits in the park, researching tree news on her phone,

the petabytes of airborne messages *course in* from pushpins all around her, up *the great roots* of population that split and spread at their *intelligent tips* [...] Bots *watch* and *match*, *encode* and *see*, *gather* and *shape* all the world’s data so quickly that the knowledge of humans stands still. (*Overstory* 605-606; italics mine)

This is precisely what Johanna Lindbo calls a “porous” relationship between the human and the non-human. That is, both can “see” and are affected by each other through the merging between them in imagery (152).

In this respect, Astrid Brake notes that in econarratives, there would be a kind of doubling of time depiction, of the human and nonhuman, and the temporal interactions that connect them. Here the use of “temporal cues” would facilitate the process of transition and merging between the two. For example, as Frank Hoel Jr. sifts through the chestnut photos he and his ancestors took over the years, half-hidden hints at US and global historical time periods and events—such as The Roaring Twenties, The Great Depression of 1930, and the Second World War—are listed against the slow but continuous and solid growth of just one chestnut tree:

The photos hide everything: the twenties that do not roar for the Hoels. The Depression that cost them two hundred acres and sends half the family to Chicago. The radio shows that ruin two of Frank Jr.'s sons for farming. The Hoel deaths in the South Pacific [...] The generations of grudge, courage, forbearance, and surprised generosity: everything a human being might call the story happens outside his photo's frame. Inside the frame, through hundreds of revolving seasons, there is only that one solo tree, its fissured bark spiraling upward into early middle age, growing at the speed of wood. (*Overstory* 18-19)

A relevant issue here is an awareness of the difficulty in imagining and conveying the enormous spatial scale involved; and of the fact that one arboreal event can be caused by another miles away—as in the case of the plague which infected American chestnuts and almost caused their extinction, which Powers brilliantly relates in the novel (*Overstory* 13-16).

But aside from concern with issues of temporal and spatial representation, econarratives, as Israelson and Olsson point out, are “sense-making systems” which depend also on “intertextual connections, generic setups, and so on” (208). *The Overstory* is rife with intertextual connections and references that foster the global edge of its green message. For example, from ancient Greece, Ovid's *Metamorphosis* is quoted a few times, where readers are asked to listen and see “how people turn into other things” (*Overstory* 147). True enough, five characters-- from different backgrounds, occupations, and various locations across the US—turn into “Land Defenders”. In Brazil, a tree witnessed by Dr. Westerford morphs into the likeness of a woman, “her arms lifting from her sides in finger branches. The face, round with alarm, stares so wildly that Patricia looks away” (*Overstory* 491). The anthropomorphic synonym for human metamorphosis, “myth”, is then mocked by Patricia as a “mispronunciation. A malaprop. Memories posted forward from people standing on the shores of the great human departure from everything that lives” (*Overstory* 492).

Instances of global cultural heritage are also present in *The Overstory*, marking the eternal bond between the nonhuman, and human cultural beliefs. At times, cultural heritage is used to explain character behavior and to propel action forward; as in the case of Neelay Mehta's paralysis, which resulted from his climbing a tree to escape the shame he must have caused his family members, in the US and India, because of unintentional misconduct in class: “Shame, for Indians, is worse than death” (*Overstory* 128). At other times, cultural artifacts and their stories are employed to give temporal, spatial, and psychological depths to human-arboreal relationships; as in the case of Mimi Ma's inherited scroll of Buddhist arhats. Their postures, the trees they gather around, the poem about trees inscribed within—all baffle Mimi at first; and though she later sells the scroll for survival, she finally gets its message as “her mind becomes a greener thing” and she becomes, like the arhats, “enlightened” (*Overstory* 621).

Underscoring this cultural and literary intertextuality is the hybrid, multimodal form of the novel. *The Overstory*, as discussed above, starts each major narrative part with a prologue, presumably uttered by a “choir” of trees. Indeed, as in every typical tragedy, by the end of the novel, many of the main characters, human and arboreal, are dead. The text also includes direct quotes from poems, and from the bible. Scientific discourse is employed to explain botanical, computational, and legal facts. The wording of green protest signs is reproduced typographically on the page (for example, on pages 357 and 448). Detective fiction elements help narrate the accidental murder of Olivia, and then the arrest and trials of Doughlas



Pavlicek and Adam Appich. And last, but not least, the gothic and the uncanny are present in narrating Olivia's eerie accidental electrocution and consequent ethereal messages.

This diversity and interconnectedness is what Powers, in his interview with Everett Hamner, is pleased to admit: He states that *The Overstory* "tries to give a glimpse of the entire, spreading, evolving, interconnected intelligence of life in all its "endless forms most beautiful," as Darwin puts it" (LARB 2018).

### Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that *The Overstory* stands up to the challenges facing econarratives—the belief that the novel form is inadequate for fully expressing environmental concerns, because of traditional texts' tendencies towards anthropocentric attitudes. By applying Hagglund's concept of "weird narratology" and Israelson and Olsson's "structural coupling", the paper illustrates how Powers, through the use of an object-oriented plot, and a structural coupling, creates simultaneously emerging narratives of trees, man, and "bots" that initially seem disparate but then mesh and coalesce. Thus, in *The Overstory*, Powers gradually blurs the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, effects a doubling of temporal and spatial representation using cues to both distinguish between, as well as bond, human and arboreal time and space scales, and employs a rich plethora of intertextual and cultural references to explain, engrain, and propel narrative action, while building a hybrid, multimodal form that partakes of the genres of tragedy, poetry, detective fiction, and the gothic—all of which places trees' botanical structures side by side with human literary creativity.

In short, in *The Overstory*, Richard Powers achieves a text where anthropocentric attitudes are thwarted, in favor of equal-footed, co-existing, co-created, non-mutually exclusive human and nonhuman narratives that coalesce and create a multidimensional storyworld which would then help morph readers into enlightened, greener, beings.

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