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Cashing Out the Inventory: Capitalocene, Metabolic Rift, and Slow Violence in *The Overstory*

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ABSTRACT

Richard Powers's *the Overstory* (2018) has attracted a large body of criticism for its trees, its multispecies awareness, and its environmental ethics, most of it concerned with questions of ontology and representation. Although the novel has a tendency to reappear in forests, it does not reappear as often in the economic mechanisms of environmental degradation, which it depends on, as it does in the courtrooms and the corporate takeover mania. This article takes up that omission, reading the novel through three ideas from Eco-Marxist thought: Jason W. Moore's Capitalocene, John Bellamy Foster's metabolic rift, and Rob Nixon's slow violence. Powers, I argue, assembles his critique of capitalism out of three formal habits. He reduces living systems to the language of value, compresses ecological time into human time, and lets institutions reproduce harm while they look neutral. Ecosystems strive to become diverse; markets strive to become uniform when a gas-station attendant refers to the "beauty strip" in a forest that hides a clear-cut, the novel itself is playing economic roles, not just providing a landscape description. The reading is contextualized alongside the other scholarly traditions of reading the novel, such as ecocriticism, plant studies, posthumanism, and environmental justice, and provides a mobile tool for seeking out the economics embedded in the novel today.



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1. Introduction

Environmental damage no longer stays in one place. Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and the slow unravelling of whole ecosystems now shape politics, science, and culture at a planetary scale, and literature has turned into one of the arenas where people try to work out what any of it means. Novels increasingly have to carry processes that move across wildly different scales of time and space, holding a single character's ordinary morning up against the centuries a forest keeps.

The Overstory sits in an unusual spot inside that project. Powers follows nine characters whose lives bend, at different angles and different speeds, toward trees. His four sections carry the titles "Roots," "Trunk," "Crown," and "Seeds," and the design pushes against a familiar assumption, the one that leaves trees as scenery. On the page they turn into something closer to a society, held together by signalling, exchange, and mutual dependence. That portrait of arboreal intelligence explains a good deal of the attention the book has drawn.

Scholarship has already done a great deal with the material. Readers have traced how the novel represents nonhuman agency, how it needles human exceptionalism, and how much it owes to posthumanist thinking. A lot of this work hears the forest as a communicating community and treats the odd, branching structure of the narrative as an effort to render kinds of intelligence that spill past the human. Such readings have genuinely sharpened our sense of how Powers reimagines the relation between people and the living world.

However, there is something missing. The criticism in *The Overstory* is typically ethical, ontological and ecological about the consciousness, both individual and collective, that the novel keeps revealing. The logging companies and the corporate raiders, the failure of law and agency are all

acknowledged, because Powers gives them space, but they are generally background to an argument about posthumanist relation, not the subjects of the argument. Thus, the economic mechanism that creates the ecological crisis in the book is seldom analyzed in detail.

It is part of a larger conflict in the environmental humanities. Nowadays, however, the Anthropocene reigns and the name proves its worth: it is not easy to name a power capable of altering planetary systems, and so it is no wonder that the Anthropocene is gaining ground and soon this will be the term used by everyone. However, it has been criticized. Such universalization of responsibility can obscure the particular social and economic systems that are responsible for the ecological crisis, as critics have cautioned, and can lead to an ecological crisis being described as a result of generic "human" activity, rather than a result of a specific way of producing, accumulating, and extracting.

For this purpose, the article adopts three instruments from the eco-Marxist tradition. In Moore's Capitalocene (Moore, 2015) the ecological crisis is shifted from humanity as a whole onto the "the particular history of capitalist accumulation." The resulting buildup that remains, Foster's metabolic rift (Foster, 1999) can be named, as the rupturing of the exchanges which an ecosystem requires to renew itself. But it so rarely presents itself as an emergency, given the slow nature of its violence; Nixon's slow violence (Nixon, 2011) accounts for that. The framework below unfolds each concept in detail, but at the start, it is important to note that they refuse. All three are going to refuse to see ecological devastation as a natural disorder or a lack of moral responsibility on the part of individuals, and I believe that's running beneath Powers' story as well.

This, then, is my argument. *The Overstory* constructs a sustained critique of the

capitalist enclosure of the web of life; and it does this in concert with Capitalocene, metabolic rift, and slow violence. The novel is not just about environmental devastation, but also the economic, temporal and institutional mechanisms that conspire to render living systems into raw materials for accumulation. Powers goes through three moves to work this critique. First, economic speech diminishes the ecological complexity to the value of what can be extracted and sold, such as the “beauty strips” along a logging road or the timber “inventory” of a takeover. Second, a struggle develops between ecological time and the fast-paced rhythms of capital, especially in the form of the Hoel family’s series of pictures of one tree every month for a century. Third, the courts, corporations, and agencies continue to perpetuate ecological harm and claim to be conducting themselves in a “procedurally clean” fashion; Patricia Westerford’s turn on the witness stand is the challenge for that.

This article’s intent is to bring Eco-Marxist thinking into the same room as ecocriticism, plant studies, posthumanism and environmental justice. One is to expand the reading of *The Overstory*. The other is to demonstrate the potential of climate fiction as a more general lens for revealing the structures under ecological crisis. The following offers a sketch for what might be called an interpretative containment of literary form, ecological critique, and economic analysis.

2. Literature Review

Since 2018, the critics of *The Overstory* have come on quickly, and have been fairly predictable: ecocriticism, plant studies, posthumanism, environmental justice, and (a little more thinly) Eco-Marxism. It’s a deserved attention. Not many recent novels have as much narrative heft as arboreal life, nor do they push this much against the grain of seeing the non-human as background. The following is not a dispassionate survey. These

four conversations have been read with one goal: to reveal the part of each one that fails to embody the economics the novel continually presents in its view.

2.1 Ecocritical Approaches and the Reconfiguration of Human–Nature Relations

The Overstory is a call to arms against anthropocentric thinking to the oldest strand, the loudest. On this account, Powers removes the trees from the set dressing to place them in the plot, in which they now function as living communities, with communication, cooperation, and interdependence at the heart of the trees themselves, rather than the green wall behind the human drama. Two things are circled by the critics in this vein. One is how it can increase ecological awareness, how its intricate layering suggests that the reader should pay attention to the bonds that can transcend any one life. The other is form: the section headings—Roots, Trunk, Crown, Seeds—are a way to suggest a growth pattern for the narrative instead of a rising and falling pattern, to set ecological time against the falling and rising of human narrative.

Newer writings turn from, not to, that reading. Dhungana (2025) takes the anthropocentrism argument further, and reads the tree of the novel as a figure with whom the novel, as if in dialogue, speaks as an actual sentient being with lives of its own. Grener (2020) approaches the formal experiment of literary history in the same way. The claim is that Powers extends practices that we have come to know as Lukácsian realism through time and space: arboreal and evolutionary time and space. This article operates on the economic floor but the lean remains a posture – capitalism and globalisation do not become the object he looks at in his reading but rather always the background.

The insight is valid but it has a limit. Here the readings are: Representation, ethics,

consciousness, how the novel makes us see and feel. In the meantime, the logging is noticed and put down, the extraction is noticed and put down, the failure of the institutions is noticed and put down, as if these were calls to ecological feeling and not a system that is following its own agenda. The join between ecology and political economy mostly goes unexplored.

2.2 Plant Studies and the Question of Arboreal Agency

Plant studies approaches from a different side, having spent a decade shaking up settled ideas about agency, intelligence, and selfhood in the vegetal world. Marder argues that plants unsettle our deepest assumptions about consciousness because their way of being simply refuses to fit human models of the subject (Marder, 2013). Hall makes the neighbouring case, that plants carry worth of their own, quite apart from any use we find for them (Hall, 2011). Both have shaped how the novel gets read, since *The Overstory* returns again and again to trees as communicating beings, caught in relations far richer than the word “resource” can hold.

Here is the scholarship that accounts for the fungal networks, the chemical signals, those long patient stretches on cooperation among organisms no ledger can tally. But it does not do justice to the question the novel will never ask, why the extraction continues in the face of all that we now know about the value of a forest. Learning is all about recognition and recognition is important in plant studies. When considered alone however it cannot account for the political economy that continues to endanger this life, and thus capital, accumulation, and degradation remain half-solved issues.

2.3 Posthumanism and Ecological Interdependence

Like plant studies, posthumanist criticism targets the self-contained human subject, but extends the field once more, insisting that human and nonhuman life are produced

together, which is to say, made together. *The Overstory*'s forests look posthuman, or multispecies entangled, or trans-corporeal, as in Haraway's (2016) multispecies entanglement, Braidotti's (2013) posthuman ethics, and Alaimo's trans-corporeality. The consequences are very real: as the novel's charm makes clear, it obliterates the dividing line between human and nonhuman life in fine detail.

Then the ceiling comes up again, one talks later. Posthumanist readings turn towards ontology and ethics, towards what beings can be, and what they deserve, rather than towards economic structure. They can demonstrate the inter-connections of ecological systems without also explaining how specific historical and economic systems make, warp and exploit the inter-connections. If you want to describe a fuller account, you must include both—interdependence—plus the machinery that makes interdependence a product a company can sell.

2.4 Environmental Justice, Slow Violence, and Uneven Ecological Harm

Environmental justice work turns the topic good. Who is represented vs. who is not, who benefits from environmental harm vs. who benefits from environmental benefit, across whom/which people, regions, ecosystems, another way to say across which is another way to say who is who, who is vulnerable and who is who who is responsible for what and who is not in what ways and for whom. A lot of that work here has been done by Nixon's slow violence. On his narrative, Ruin is a process, and one that happens over time, in forms the dominant political and media instincts are programmed to ignore a single disaster. It is a skillfully framed book that flits between one person's story and the planetary processes that surround it, and Heise's connective thread is especially helpful, as it demonstrates how local ecological experience expands outward to global

process. As powerful as it is in identifying inequality and systemic harm, this scholarship becomes murkier in describing how. How do the economic processes that give rise to inequality and systemic harm operate? Naming and explaining the engine are two different things, and here political economy must come into play.

2.5 Eco-Marxism, Capitalocene, and the Political Economy of Ecology

Eco-Marxist scholarship meets that limit without flinching. Its starting point is blunt: you cannot understand ecological crisis apart from how capitalism organises production, accumulation, and extraction. Degradation is no unlucky side effect of human activity in general; it comes out of specific, datable economic structures, and two formulations of that claim carry this article.

Foster's metabolic rift makes the ecological case. Capital ruptures the material exchanges that keep ecological systems whole, so ruin follows from a contradiction inside capitalist production and not from a run of bad decisions. Moore's Capitalocene makes the historical one, moving the cause of crisis off humanity-in-general and onto capitalism's long project of treating nature as a store of cheap inputs, with forests, soils, rivers, minerals, and labour all folded into a system built to keep expanding. Patel and Moore then push the mechanism to a fine point with their account of "cheap nature" (Patel & Moore, 2017): accumulation feeds on the systematic undervaluing of ecological processes, which get entered in the books as outside resources instead of live participants in production.

The closest thing to a precedent comes from Vermeulen (2023). Reading the novel under the heading "Forests as Markets," he notices that the arboreal networks Powers describes bear a structural resemblance to the neoliberal idea of "spontaneous order" tied to Friedrich Hayek. It is a shrewd observation. Vermeulen catches the rhyme between the

novel's ecological language and its economic language, but he lets the argument rest at the resemblance. He never specifies the moves, linguistic, temporal, institutional, by which that rhyme hardens into a structure of extraction, and specifying them is the work this article sets itself.

These are the very tools the novel seems to hand its readers, and the very ones its critics have picked up least. Capitalism gets named as a contributing factor now and then, in passing. What stays rare is a reading that pulls Capitalocene analysis, metabolic rift, and environmental justice into one argument and holds them against the shape of the narrative. That is the gap this article is written into.

2.6 Research Gap and Scholarly Contribution

Taken together, the ecocritical, plant-studies, posthumanist, and environmental-justice conversations have lit up a great deal: the novel's interdependence, its arboreal agency, its ethics. What they have mostly left in shadow is the economic structure organising the crises the book dramatises. This article works that shadow. It draws Capitalocene analysis, metabolic rift, and slow violence into steady conversation and treats ecological consciousness, institutional power, and political economy as strands the novel already braids through its own form, rather than as three topics to be shelved apart.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Capitalocene, Metabolic Rift, and Slow Violence: An Integrated Reading

The ecocritical and posthumanist approaches, whatever their reach, cannot on their own connect the novel's ecological damage to the economic structures behind it. That connection is what the three concepts introduced above are for, and this section develops each far enough to put it to work. The order is deliberate. Moore explains the cause, Foster the injury, Nixon the way the

injury escapes notice, and the reading that follows depends on all three at once rather than on any single one.

Begin with the Capitalocene, which arrived as a rebuke to Anthropocene stories that lay the crisis at humanity's door. Moore's counter is that ecological degradation issues from historically specific forms of capitalist organisation, and above all from capitalism's endless appropriation of what he calls "cheap nature," the extraction of labour, energy, raw materials, and ecological resources at prices low enough to keep accumulation moving. Read this way, forests stop being environmental features and become line items in an economic system that turns living ground into exchange value. The gain is a change of aim, off humanity in general and onto the particular structures that actually drive ecological change.

Foster's metabolic rift fills in the ecological half. Reading Marx on capitalist agriculture, he argues that capitalist production fractures the material exchanges holding ecological systems together, so that the circulation of nutrients, energy, and resources between societies and their environments grows steadily more broken. And the injury is not merely a matter of taking too much. What breaks is the set of relations an ecosystem needs in order to recover at all, a distinction that carries real weight for a novel so absorbed in relation, where trees, fungal threads, animals, and human communities all figure as members of one larger body, so that felling a forest costs far more than the tally of trees.

Nixon's slow violence brings the third dimension, and it turns the reading from an account of causes into an account of how harm survives inspection. Ruin, in his description, unfolds slowly, by increments, often unseen, the opposite of the spectacular disaster that seizes attention at once. Because it gathers on timescales past ordinary notice, it slips out of the cultural stories equipped to

register it. This proves central to the way *The Overstory* stages institutional power, which arrives through ordinary legal procedure, corporate decision, and bureaucratic routine, not through catastrophe. Ecological harm passes for normal exactly because the institutions producing it look legitimate and procedurally clean.

What matters is how the three concepts lean on one another once a reader tries to use them on the same page of the novel. Ask why an old-growth stand gets logged at all, and Moore's cheap nature answers. Ask why the logging wounds far more than the trees that fall, and the answer runs through Foster. Nixon then accounts for the strangest part, which is that nobody in the story treats any of it as an emergency. Take away any one of these and the reading slumps back into a familiar shape, either a morality tale about greedy men or an elegy for vanishing woods. Keep all three and something harder holds still long enough to be seen: accumulation, ecological rupture, and institutional patience wired together inside a narrative that never once stops to explain the wiring.

3.2 Three Reading Categories

The reading assembled above becomes usable through three categories, each drawn from a pattern that recurs across the novel.

Linguistic reduction of ecological complexity. This category looks at how economic speech remakes ecological systems into objects of extraction and exchange, through the vocabulary of resource management, forestry, ownership, productivity, and valuation, and asks how that vocabulary works as an instrument of ecological simplification.

Temporal compression of ecological processes. Here the concern is the clash between ecological time, where systems develop across decades, centuries, sometimes millennia, and capitalist time, with its quickening cycles of production and consumption. The question is how

degradation follows from squeezing long ecological processes into short economic reckoning.

Institutional reproduction of extraction. This last category examines the legal, corporate, political, and bureaucratic structures through which environmental destruction turns ordinary. Its attention falls less on individual villains than on how institutions keep extractive relations going while they appear rational, objective, and above reproach.

3.3 Methodology

The study investigates these aspects through a qualitative textual analysis, which builds on Eco-Marxist literary criticism alongside close reading, and enables a focus on the narrative form in terms of ecological and political meaning. Passages were selected based on three criteria: those that put in sharp relief the connection between forests and a system of extraction; those that foreground the collision between ecological and capitalist time; and those that introduce legal, corporate or governmental institutions to the space of environmental decisions. Three clusters were extracted from those criteria. One collects the timber industry and the novel's economic images of forest, such as the halls of clearcutting behind roadside "beauty strips" and the leveraged buyout of Humboldt Timber, discovered by Douglas Pavlicek. Arboreal time is followed by a second one, based on the century of the Hoel family's photographic documentation of a single chestnut. A third is in action on institutions, most notably Patricia Westerford's cross-examination in a federal courtroom. The analysis then scrutinises each cluster, extracts from it the underlying economic assumptions, and decodes the pattern one by one, using Capitalocene analysis, metabolic rift and slow violence.

4. Analysis

4.1 "Beauty Strips" and "Inventory" in *The Overstory*: Linguistic Reduction and Cheap Nature

In *The Overstory*, language and perception continue to revolve around one another. But Powers suggests that an ecosystem must be deconstructed in the mind before it can be deconstructed on the ground, and turned into something that can be done with an eye to economics. In this novel, words never take the place of a neutral pane of glass that is placed over the world. Mile after mile of what reads as unbroken forest turns out to be "the thinnest artery of pretend life, a scrim hiding a bomb crater as big as a sovereign state" (Powers, 2018, p. 89). A gas-station attendant hands him the industry's own name for the trick: "beauty strips. Vista corridors" (Powers, 2018, p. 89). The euphemism does real labour. Clear-cutting is not just tucked physically behind a curtain of standing trunks; the words chosen for that curtain, "beauty," "vista," work to hide the cutting going on behind it. And when the attendant sums up the national forest's purpose, its job is "to get the cut out, cheap" (Powers, 2018, p. 89), Moore's whole argument about cheap nature lands in six words spoken by a man selling silver-dollar gas.

The same move returns in the register of corporate finance. Humboldt Timber falls to a hostile takeover, floated on junk bonds and rationalised by the notion that a firm not squeezing out maximum profit deserves to be broken up, and the raiders' plan comes wrapped in that same flattening speech: "cashing out every salable scrap of timber in the inventory," which in practice means "lots of seven- and eight-hundred-year-old trees" (Powers, 2018, p. 202). One word, "inventory," bears the conceptual burden that Moore's theory foresees. A forest built over centuries changes, within one noun, from what it is to what it is not, to what it is not, for it is made of interchangeable parts

waiting to be liquidated. Powers adds to the absurdity by having a character tell the story of the buyout in Wall Street-speak: “Magic!” Not in the vocabulary of forestry, “loot that pays you extra to plunder it” (Powers, 2018, p. 202), but rather in the vocabulary of economics, so that the abstracted economy — not the chainsaw — can be the instrument of ruin.

The novel’s description of trees’ quiet communication constructs its contrary argument in the face of all that management speech. Results on fungi networks, chemical signaling and cooperative plant interactions between trees outline exchanges which no ledger can capture. The trees appear not so much as units of production as as part of a network of exchange, which is not captured by the categories of “inventory” and “board feet.” This clash between these two vocabularies is not a mere flourish, but a claim on the nature of knowledge. Forests are not worthless, the novel makes this point, insistently, with some insistence, and forests don’t fall because they’re worthless, they fall because the economic lexicon reigns.

4.2 “Sped Up to the Rate of Human Desire” and “Roots, Trunk, Crown, Seeds” in *The Overstory*: Temporal Compression and the Metabolic Rift

If words are one route by which ecological systems become extractable, time is another. Powers stages the conflict through the Hoel family’s chestnut, photographed by John Hoel from the same spot, on the same date, month after month, from the spring of 1903 onward, a habit his relations judge, not without reason, as faintly cracked: “He’s waiting for it to do something interesting” (Powers, 2018, p. 16). Later Hoels keep the ritual going, packing a century of near-invisible growth into a stack of photographs, and the novel says plainly what the act is for. John Hoel wants “to capture the tree and see what the thing looks like, sped up to the rate of human desire” (Powers, 2018, p. 16).

Against all that managerial talk, the novel’s account of how trees communicate quietly builds its counter-argument. Findings about fungal networks, chemical signalling, and cooperation among trees describe forms of exchange no ledger can record. Trees show up less as separate units of yield than as members of sprawling networks of exchange, the sort the categories of “inventory” and “board feet” have no way to register. The friction between these two vocabularies is no mere flourish; it amounts to a claim about knowledge itself. Forests do not fall because they lack worth, a point the novel makes with some insistence; they fall because the reigning economic vocabulary cannot see the worth they carry.

4.3 “Not Dollars, Patty” and “The Crippling Expense” in *The Overstory*: Institutional Reproduction and Slow Violence

The evaluation extends to the institutions which make ruin respectable, past language, past time. At a federal injunction hearing about logging on public land, Patricia Westerford’s appearance in the novel as an expert witness, who, as the novel warns, is not, whatever the docket says, “about dollars” (Powers, 2018, p. 260): No one in the courtroom seems to doubt that Westerford’s science is valid. The question is whether science (a kind of knowledge) can answer any questions. Opposing counsel writes her letter from three dendrologists accusing her of a method she used in her earlier published work that was faulty, and then the death trap is thrown: “You have disturbed the old ideas—how do you know that the new studies won’t disturb yours?” (Powers, 2018, p. 260). She can’t of course—after all, no scientist could. What is true about the novel, however, is that it does achieve “a point too subtle for any court of law,” (Powers, 2018, p. 260), the very thing which Nixon’s slow violence is. The procedure should not be in opposition to science. It’s only necessary to make science useless in the room.

The turning point of the scene is economic and not epistemological. The market doesn't say that the old-growth forests produce more through mushrooms, fish and the other methods than through clearcutting, but Westerford does: "Because ecosystems tend toward diversity, and markets do the opposite" (p. 262, Powers, 2018). That's where the point of silence comes in; she doesn't say it, "She's smart enough not to say this. Never attack the local gods." (Powers, 2018, p. 262) Data the institution can take in. What it can neither absorb, nor even hear, is a flat statement that it is organised against ecology. But Powers puts the idea of conservation into the house register in the novel, and the forest that stands is the "crippling expense of not cutting down trees" (2018, p. 262).

Not one bit of it is a show. Logging permits, regulatory sign-offs, corporate planning, court procedure: all of this is normal—even banal—until it shows up in open violence, a threat Nixon expects institutional damage to come in the form of. The wreckage of the novel is not extraordinary, but something that's normal; it's not just a loose end in the story, but the end.

4.4 Reading the Three Registers Together

But if you also include the "beauty strip" (the series of pictures of the chestnut), and the line that's so expensive (the line that's so expensive), they no longer seem like three separate themes. The attendant euphemism is a given valuation act. Give the same act a hundred years and you get the photos of the Hoels, give the same act a federal hearing and you get language of "crippling expense." When it starts on the road, it goes on the ledger and the injunction confirms. It is her continuity, her argument. By taking environmental degradation beyond the level of isolated incidents, it becomes a problem of organisation and historical and institutional: so the recurring alarms throughout the novel

that the change of the individual's heart is not enough.

5. Discussion: Beyond Environmental Ethics? Reconsidering The Overstory Through Political Economy

The above interpretation cannot be the only one to be interpreted from this novel and it's not fair to claim so. A remarkable body of work has developed around *The Overstory*, in environmental ethics, posthumanism and multispecies relation, and in its challenge to anthropocentric notions of agency, intelligence, and value, among others. It's not a misappropriation of the work. Westerford's work does, indeed, depict forests that exist on systems of communication and mutual aid that do not fit into the inherited concepts of individuality and competition, on other scales of time and space exist ways of life that are more complex than human ones.

When left to itself, however, the reading holds together a number of recurring elements of the book. Powers researches logging companies, corporate financing, courts, land ownership and activism, not just paying lip service to such piddling details. The social and economic forces are the ones that are questioned from the beginning to the end of the novel and the ones where a reading that is ethical or ontological can easily triumph over the capacities that are undermining ecological flourishing.

It's the hardest part of the book on knowledge. The interconnectedness of all things is already evident in the story, and Westerford is demonstrating it to readers and characters, over and over. But logging remains and learning has not yet led to institutional change. It would have cost them more than a case in court if the evidence in the book was enough. While on the other hand, Powers' world is one that meets with resistance, not ignorance – but resistance in the form of the economic and institutional structures that organized environmental relations in the first place; resistance that

Westerford refers to throughout the novel but is unable to speak on when he arrives at the stand.

The resistance is understandable only in an Eco-Marxist perspective and not in the other than that. But if the scene is read in cheap nature terms, then it's much more an account of the failure of the court to persuade or even to be brave: whatever good science is, the court did what it was supposed to do: keep wood cheap. There is no stupidity involved with opposition; it's being unaware and a form of evil. It is situated within a field of law, namely property law, where its logic is already in play: The injunction procedure and the extractive industry. None of this is a reflection of a posthumanist or an ecocritical or ethics-oriented reading, which recognizes some of the elements that are true to Powers' vision. his claim is only narrower because in this novel, interdependence with the environment is always in terms of systems that continually intrude upon it.

This is not to say that other methods are thrown out the window. It would request them to be piled up. It's not that there's a disagreement between posthumanist critics and eco Marxist critics about *The Overstory*, it's that they are both at different floors of the same building and *The Overstory* is built upon those floors. In the same chapter in the same sentence, Powers invites his reader to feel the weirdness of a talking forest, and to watch as it disappears, leaving who? It is that double demand that is the point and it is the reason for the continuation of criticism that can read only one register at a time, leaving the novel half-read. Climate fiction like this is seldom willing to relinquish an ecological meaning which is purely ecological. It's a damage of economy and damage to law, it's a damage to culture and the reading has to be able to carry all of that.

6. Conclusion

In this text I've tried to explain how Richard Powers's *the Overstory* is an attack on

capitalism's ability to dominate the web of life, one that is systemic, essentially attacking capitalism at every turn through the following three mechanisms: linguistic reduction, temporal compression, and institutional reproduction. Powers doesn't think that harming the environment is an isolated occurrence or that he is lacking in character. The crisis in his novel is not from general (but particular) economic systems of history which turn living systems into things to be accumulated.

Be aware of the extent to which individual words carry that case. "Beauty strip" and "inventory" of ancient trees are not delirious sounds and terms; they are the moment that an ecosystem becomes a system of thought, that can be introduced into the machinery of accumulation, and work efficiently. So it begins here in the language, before any chainsaw begins to start. And the same discount is seen again and again throughout the novel. In John Hoel's photograph of his chestnut for a hundred years, watching it "sped up to the rate of human desire," in Powers's reordering of the whole book as "Roots," "Trunk," "Crown," and "Seeds," the conflict on display is between the slow clock of the forest and the even slower clock of the market, and the injury inflicted is not so much on the taking as on the dictation of a speed no living thing can keep up with.

In the courtroom, all that's metaphor ends. The hearing at the Westinghouse site is the exhibit of ruin ending a daily routine that is, on the surface, scientific, rational, legal, and procedurally neat; even then, unable to hear the science, let alone believe it. It's the matter-of-fact answer to the hopeful question that's the novel's answer. The problem with ecological crisis isn't that there is a lack of knowledge, the problem is that the institutions that gather and keep the knowledge push the accumulation and ownership of it ahead of the ecology Westerford keeps to herself.

The findings are relevant to the current debates on 'environmental humanities' and ecocriticism. Much of the criticism has been on arboreal agency, ecological consciousness, and post-humanist ethics – valuable work which cannot, on its own, account for the economic conditions that constitute the crises the novel demonstrates. In the interest of providing a space where eco-Marxist thought can be joined to ecocritical, posthumanist, plant-studies, and environmental-justice scholarship, this article has sought to demonstrate that ecological relation and political economy will not be neatly separated into two distinct fields, and that the novel's forests will have meaning when placed within the context of an analysis of the economic structures pressing upon them.

There's a methodological point here also. I have written in narrative form as if to make knowledge, rather than as a showpiece of theory formulated elsewhere. If read in this way, the typologies of linguistic reduction, temporal compression and institutional reproduction transcend this one book. Kim

Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*, and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*: all, in their own voice, take place at this intersection of ecological crisis and capitalist modernity in different histories and geographies. Such comparative study might reveal more clearly the ways that current literature addresses the structural causes of ecological crisis and not just the symptoms.

In the end *The Overstory* suggests that environmental destruction cannot be understood by any story that severs ecological trouble from the economic systems making it. Forests, and the more-than-human communities around them, are, according to Powers, intertwined with the historical mechanisms by which value, property, and accumulation are being organized. The novel has the merit of revealing those bonds, and of inviting us to think beyond environmental issues towards a more general reflection on the conditions of life in the Capitalocene; it has the boldness to speak the names of these forces when they put that connectedness at odds.

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