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# *The Overstory: A Blueprint for Cultural Change in the Anthropocene*

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## Abstract

Within the field of ecocriticism, there is an ongoing discussion about climate change fiction and the capacity for literature to inspire cultural change in relation to the climate crisis of the Anthropocene. Relatively new novels explore the inherent conflict between consumerist features of contemporary human culture and scientific facts regarding human impact on life on Earth. In Richard Powers Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Overstory* (2018), cultural change is explored at great length. In this essay, I explore ideas of cultural change and the possible connections the novel makes between cultural change and storytelling. This essay finds that the book argues for storytelling playing an important part within a larger system of activism that in turn has the potential to inspire cultural change. Apart from storytelling, this essay sees cultural change in the novel as pertaining to reconfigurations of societal institutions and individual actions of local activism as well. The essay approaches the novel as existing within the category of climate change fiction and links it with ethical discussions from the field of ecocriticism.

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# Introduction

In recent years, the lives of trees have received increased attention across different platforms of society. Ecologist Suzanne Simard, the founder of the research project “The Mother Tree”, has shown in studies since 1997 that trees communicate with each other through fungal systems called mycorrhizal networks in ways more intricate than what was previously known in the field (Simard et. al). More recently, her research also proved that the diverse structure of forests, on which humans rely for clean water and air, depends on the preservation of old trees (Simard). In 2022, BBC Earth published *The Green Planet*, narrated by David Attenborough. It is a documentary series where the intricate lives of plants are revealed to audiences all across the globe, and where the large-scale deforestation happening all around the world is decried and lifted as a matter of great urgency. In the episode “Seasonal Forests”, the issue of global warming is presented as another detriment to trees apart from human exploitation, disturbing the sensitive and complex systems that rely on somewhat regular seasonal progressions. The IPCC, or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, also shows in the *AR6 Synthesis Report on Climate Change 2023* and the paper “Summary for Policymakers” that radical lowering of emissions must happen in the next few decennia if the irreversible loss to ecosystems, such as forests, and the adverse consequences for human life on Earth that would result from it are to be avoided (24). In other words, climate-related questions and the issues of human impact on life on Earth are more relevant than ever before.

The climate crisis is, however, not only a crisis in the sense that important biotopes and ecosystems are being destroyed, or a rise in water levels and extreme weather conditions. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh identifies the difficulty that contemporary human culture, in the broadest sense, has in understanding and responding to the urgent issues presented to us by climate change: “The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (9). Ghosh illustrates how a depiction of the climate crisis found within a book might cause the book to appear melodramatic or unrealistic to readers, despite its capturing actual occurrences (24). He continues by explaining how this causes the book which is attempting to illustrate the reality of the climate crisis to be relegated to descriptive genres like fantasy, horror, or science fiction, separating it from what is considered “serious fiction” (24). What his examples show is a widespread impossibility of imagining the current state of climate change as something real.

The difficulty that contemporary culture has in responding adequately to the threat of climate crisis can be linked to conventions in storytelling. Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sulzbach mention that traditional modes of storytelling tend to have difficulties capturing the global aspect of climate change and that the climate crisis challenges storytellers to approach themes of nature in a new way (9). Ghosh also identifies the hurdle for cultural imaginings of climate change as related to issues of scale. For example, he shows how a novel might be set around one specific river, and capture the changes and lives unfolding there (62). This makes issues that exist on a broader scale than what can be captured in any distinct location difficult to illustrate well in novelistic fiction, as “inconceivably vast” (62) forces that impact the entire globe simultaneously, such as rising sea levels, are likely to fall outside of the scope of most novelistic fiction.

I would argue that the forests of the world form another of those “inconceivably vast” forces. Forests have previously covered most of the Earth’s surface in one shape or another, and a world without any wild trees appears as unreal to most people as a dystopic horror story. It follows the same logic as outlined by Ghosh, then, that it would be difficult for culture, in general, to imagine the disappearance of natural forests in the Anthropocene, being “the period of time during which human activities have had an environmental impact on the Earth regarded as constituting a distinct geological age” (Merriam-Webster), as a thing that has already happened in many parts of the world, and which is currently happening at increasing rates in the rest of the world. Such a vast change as natural forests disappearing completely from the Earth, and the consequences regarding people’s access to clean air, water, food, and resources that would inevitably follow are simply too big for most traditional modes of storytelling to conceptualize. Still, the scenario is very real, and many countries in the world have only a few percent of old-growth forest left. To move beyond the cultural crisis that makes such an overhanging reality feel somewhat unreal, new cultural expressions must find ways of adequately illustrating deforestation as a real contemporary issue that is affecting people’s lives right now, all over the world.

Richard Powers’ novel *The Overstory* manages to go beyond many of the cultural limitations of tackling the environmental issues of the Anthropocene as presented by Ghosh, Johns-Putra, and Sulzbach. It is a novel about trees, where trees are active agents who influence human beings around them. The story is told mainly through the perspectives of nine human protagonists who come to understand the central importance of trees and forests in their own lives, and in securing the future of humankind. It is also about how they come to believe, and act out on the simple, yet radical idea that “*A forest deserves protection regardless of its*

*value to humans*” (*The Overstory* 414, italics in original). The novel manages to go beyond many of the cultural limitations presented above by being an ambitious project in its perspective of time and place, by showing the issues of deforestation through multiple perspectives in the shape of independent and interconnected storylines, and by managing to give an overview of contemporary deforestation in the US. Ghosh understands that the cultural limitations of anthropogenic storytelling are not “insuperable obstacles” (73), but rather, they are “challenges” (73) that “can be, and have been, overcome in many novels” (73). There are many ways in which these challenges have been overcome in this novel. For instance, the book challenges ideas of the possible relationships between humans and trees, and does so while remaining rooted in the present time, and while unfolding in a world recognizable as our own. *The Overstory* manages to a great extent to illustrate the vastness of the change that deforestation is inflicting upon the world.

In this essay, I argue that Powers’ novel presents the multifaceted concept of a cultural shift that would have to be realized in the US for the country to be able to respond effectively to the scientific facts surrounding climate change and deforestation, and mitigate the consequences that they predict. The multifaceted concept of cultural change is presented by the novel through the diversity of the cast of protagonists, representing how people with different interests, characters, and backgrounds create cultural changes in a way that reflects them individually, while still being part of a common cause. The activism in the book ranges from tree sittings, where people climb up into a treetop and stay there in order to make it impossible for someone to cut it down, to creations of art and videogames, to education and other acts of civil disobedience. The diverse perspective on activism in the novel also broadens the concept of cultural change that it presents. Cultural change is also connected to changes in national institutions in the novel, as mainstream culture is enforced to a large extent through the way that institutions are run. However, the novel also features activism on other levels of scale. While some protagonists work with impacting large institutions or the opinions of people across the nation, others represent acts of cultural change that affect only their own backyard. All of these perspectives together amount to a more complete vision of what cultural changes are asked of us in the Anthropocene. The role that storytelling has in the novel in affecting and being a part of those cultural changes is one that I interpret as being of particularly great importance, and it is a theme that will be investigated to a larger extent than other cultural aspects present in the novel.

Previous writing on *The Overstory* has noted the overlapping between art and science that is prominent in the book, applying a multi-disciplinary approach to the reading of the novel

by making use of contemporary studies of plant life (Antonella Riem). Others make note of the ways that the novel challenges the anthropocentric limitations of traditional novelistic storytelling (Schoene Berthold). This essay makes use both of the diversity in the subjects the novel is made up of and the discussions about storytelling in the Anthropocene that the book affords. However, I use both aspects of the novel to support my general argument about the overarching concept of cultural change that can be found in the story.

I will convey my argument in the following way: First, I look at how the novel promotes certain ethical beliefs and relates to discussions in the field of ecocriticism. This will help give an overview of the general ethical stance in the novel that ideas of cultural change are based on. Second, I will present the disapproval that protagonists in the novel feel towards institutions of law, education, and science. In this part, I will also explore how different characters try to change these institutions to better respond to issues of climate change, or at least envision how the institutions would need to change. Third, I will assess the position of stories and storytelling in the idea of cultural change presented in the novel. Fourth, I will go through some of the different kinds of activism that are present in the book, and categorize them according to differences of scale and purpose. In this section I will also establish a connection made possible in the book between the activism of storytelling and other types of activism, suggesting their interconnectivity. Finally, I will ponder how ideas of storytelling that exist internally in the novel can be considered in a discussion about the novel's impact on the contemporary culture of the real world. In other words, I will discuss the points made inside the novel about storytelling and cultural change can be applied to the book itself impacting contemporary culture.

## **Ecocritical Approaches**

The depiction of trees in *The Overstory* urges readers to view them in a possibly new way. The novel presents a deeper and less anthropocentric understanding of trees than the conventional one. It does this by recognizing trees as active sovereign entities with their own 'language' of chemical signals, by portraying them as having agency, and by placing them within their own concept of time (530, 1-4). The radical otherness of trees presented by the novel makes them into more than aesthetic objects, and works as a subversion of anthropocentrism, showing that trees possess a completely different perspective on the world than humans do. Furthermore, the perspective of trees is not presented as inferior to the human perspective. On the contrary,

trees are shown as possessing an understanding of nature and plants that far outreaches any human understanding. In the very beginning of the book, a woman is sitting in a forest, and the trees around her are communicating with her, possibly through chemical signals or scents (1-4). Their message is rendered in words, and the trees say to the woman: “Your kind never sees us whole. You miss half of it, and more [...] If your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we’d drown you in meaning” (4). This, together with the many evocations of trees as Gods (13,16, 269), works within the book to place humans in a less dominant position compared to trees, and favors an ecocentric rather than an anthropocentric worldview.

This perspective on nature presented in the novel works in aligning it with the ethical possibility found in ecocriticism of a non-identitarian ecocentric ethics, which is a stance balancing the need to see humans as part of a larger system, while refraining from anthropomorphism, remaining conscious of the otherness of trees. This stance itself is countercultural, and is part of the foundation for the idea of cultural change presented by the novel. Ecocritic Adeline Johns-Putra argues for the need of establishing non-identitarian ecocentric ethics in the Anthropocene, which is contrasted with the deeply anthropocentric care ethics that still dominates much of the climate discourse today (27-29). The concept of non-identitarian ecocentric ethics consists of balancing the recognition of nature as separate from and unknowable for human beings, while still arguing for the intrinsic value of both human and non-human life, and emphasizing the intricate ecological networks that all of the individual species of the world, humans included, make up together. *The Overstory* promotes this ethical standpoint by presenting trees as radically different from, and somewhat incomprehensible to humans (1-4), while still keeping with the idea of sameness and connection that trees and humans share (336). It might seem paradoxical to argue simultaneously for both the sameness and otherness of trees in relation to humans, but the relationship between humans and non-humans is not always simple. One definition of ecocritic inquiry is that it consists of “interrogations of what it is to be human in the tangle of [human and non-human] relationships” (Johns-Putra and Sultzbach 12-13). The word “tangle” indicates that relationships between humans and non-humans are not, and have probably never been simple. Recognizing this complexity, the option of non-identitarian ecocentric ethics presents itself as a preferable way of navigating this tangled relationship, both according to voices within the field of ecocriticism and the arguments found within the novel itself.

Conveying the idea of a non-identitarian ecocentric ethics succinctly through a story is a way in which the novel can be said to attempt the task of cultural change that Johns-Putra and Sulzbach identify as a promising aspect of climate change literature: “[P]erhaps it is in the

new climate imaginings that we might come to terms with the dilemma of how to decentre ourselves from old ideas of observing, utilizing, or exploiting climate, while calling to each other to collectively act in ways that respect it” (7). The book certainly challenges old ideas of observing trees by attempting to see them as active, living things, striving for their own goals alongside humans (117). The book also challenges anthropocentric perspectives, by introducing the non-identitarian aspect of trees in their being somewhat incomprehensible to humans (1-4). Calling for respect is done by the multiple renditions of trees as Gods (13,16, 269), and by inducing awe by showing their age (446). This respect is shown concretely in the novel when protagonists Olivia and Nick are to do a tree sitting at a massive redwood, and experience an immense sense of awe and infatuation with the tree (325). Because of a sense of empathy and understanding for the characters, the use of the human protagonists works in the book to illustrate the idea of trees that the novel conveys more clearly. The ethical foundation of the novel helps to relate the work to the field of ecocriticism, and to contextualize the kind of cultural change it argues for through its narrative.

## **Institutions**

Much of what *The Overstory* presents as unsustainable in contemporary culture is exemplified through its depiction of institutions of law, science, and education. For instance, the novel presents the law as being steadily on the side of capitalist corporations, and as doing very little in terms of stopping such corporations from destroying wildlife and old forests. It also presents institutions of education discouraging original thought and inquiry into life and nature that does not generate economic wealth. The novel can also be said to criticize institutions of science for discouraging insightful research which goes against the capitalist-patriarchal model that society is largely dictated by. Finally, the institution of law enforcement is presented in the novel as biased in targeting environmentalist activists disproportionately, while letting corporations get away to a larger degree with unlawful behavior. In other words, cultural change is connected in the novel to changes in the political and economic structures of institutions. In this part, I will go through depictions in the novel of institutions being managed in unsustainable ways, and presenting, where possible, the changes the novel envisions these institutions as needing to undergo.

The novel suggests ways in which the institution of law could change to better respond to issues in the Anthropocene in the storyline of Dorothy Cazaly-Brinkman and Ray Brinkman.

Their storyline shows the perspective of how an urban pair living far from any old-growth forest and having little to no actual engagement in environmental issues can re-learn their bias towards inherited ideas of ownership and exploitation, and thus come to be a part of a cultural change towards a more environmentally friendly world. Ray is a successful property lawyer who has worked all his life in protecting people's and companies' right to do what they wish with their property, intellectual or otherwise. He reads a proposition that suggests that trees should have rights under the law, a sentiment that goes strongly against dominant cultural concepts of trees as human property. The text is titled "Should Trees Have Standing?" (309), a text which Powers mentions in an interview as cited from the real environmental essay of the same name by Christopher Stone, published in 1972 (Shakespeare and Company Bookshop). Reading the text has a profound influence on Ray as he begins to understand that he agrees with the text, an insight which runs contrary to what he has been working for all of his life: "His entire career until this moment—protecting the property of those with a right to grow—begins to seem like one long war crime, like something he'll be imprisoned for, come the revolution" (313). The text "Should Trees Have Standing?" acknowledges that the proposition, when heard by proponents of mainstream culture, of which Ray is one, is "*bound to sound odd or frightening or laughable*" (313, italics in original). This prediction is true, as Ray admits to Dorothy upon reading it that he "[doesn't] know whether to throw it across the room and laugh or to set it on fire and kill [him]self" (309). The proposition goes on to argue against a potential counter-argument that proponents of mainstream culture would likely make: "*It is no answer to say that streams and forests cannot have standing because streams and forests cannot speak. Corporations cannot speak, either, nor can statues, estates, infants, incompetents, municipalities, or universities. Lawyers speak for them*" (313, italics in original). In this way, the proposition shows the arbitrariness of the coverage of the law and indicates a way that the institution of law could become better and more just towards non-human life. It does this by showing a move away from anthropocentrism towards an ethics that is more ecocentric, where needs that cannot be expressed in human terms are valued, too.

Ray's belief in the right to own property is presented as tightly interwoven with his desire to own his wife, Dorothy. Dorothy is having an affair, and Ray is aware of this at the time of reading the proposition. The issue of property ownership and the issue of having control over his wife exist simultaneously in Ray's mind and seem to interweave in a way that suggests their connection (313). The novel presents issues of law and ownership as connected to patriarchal institutions of gender roles in marriage and shows that Ray, who might symbolize

mainstream capitalist ideology, has been indoctrinated in an idea of ownership and entitlement that is problematic in more ways than one.

The connection that ties capitalism and patriarchal structures to the exploitation of nature is a theme that is reoccurring throughout the book, aligning it with arguments often considered central to the movement of ecofeminism. Sherilyn MacGregor explains the position in the introduction of the *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*: “The common denominator is the analysis that social oppression and environmental exploitation are inextricably linked to fundamental social constructs that have co-evolved with patriarchal capitalist-colonial power relations” (2). The idea that social oppression and environmental exploitation rest on the same underlying social constructs shows the cultural issues of climate exploitation in a new light, and suggests feminist approaches as one of the ways that cultural change could happen in ways that are beneficial for environmental endeavors, too.

The interconnectedness of the issues of patriarchy, capitalism, and climate exploitation, apart from Dorothy and Ray’s storyline, can be seen in the storyline of Patricia. Patricia is a character based on the aforementioned ecologist Suzanne Simard, who comes to do research in the book which mirrors Simard’s work in the real world. For Patricia, patriarchal and capitalist power structures become very problematic when her scientific research becomes discredited as a result of them. Her findings, which mirror the findings Suzanne Simard made in the nineties of the interconnectivity of trees through a fungal network, turn out to be much too groundbreaking, and much too incompatible with the rest of the ideas in the field to be accepted by the patriarchal-capitalist elite. So, three leading men in the field, all from prestigious institutes of research write a scathing criticism of her work, discrediting its findings. They do this by claiming an “*almost embarrassing misunderstanding of natural selection*” (159, italics in original) on her part, and criticize the trustworthiness of the study, saying that there could be other factors that produce the results than what the research says (159).

While the criticism is directed at the contents of the study, it is clear from the novel that capitalist-patriarchal power structures are the real reason her work is discredited. Patricia is a marginalized person in that she is a woman in a male-dominated field. Further, her long observation of trees is motivated by sheer curiosity and does not have economic gain as its end goal, which makes her appear as even more of an oddity (154). The patriarchal power structure is shown through the condescending tone of the criticism. For instance, the novel stresses the intentional use of the female-coded name ‘Patricia’, instead of using the professional title ‘Dr. Westerford’, which would be more fitting for a serious academic context, as an indication of gender-based disapproval (159). The same passage shows how the power structure of the

patriarchy within the scientific field makes people choose not to question the criticism of Patricia's work, thus withholding the cultural order, and as a result, no one bothers to double-check her results (159). The truth is that her research is correct, which is shown by other scholars at a later stage (177), and that it contains very important information for developing forestry towards being a more sustainable practice.

There is a possibility that not only patriarchal power structures play a part in the discrediting of Patricia's work, but that capitalist power structures do so, too. This possibility is only implied by the novel: The new information that Patricia's research project provides to decision-makers is likely to result in changes in forestry policies if it becomes widely accepted, which would in turn harm the capacity of forests to generate economic profit for their property owners in the short-term. Such a result is deeply undesirable according to capitalist ideals of maximum profit. If the goal in the field has hitherto been acquiring maximum economic gain from forests, then any study that is likely to change the possibility of doing just that must surely be seen as a threat. Indeed, Patricia later attends a conference where she argues for the preservation of forests in a way that directly affects the lawful rights of clear-cutting old forests in the US, posing her as a threat to logging companies, and showing the influential power of her research to change practices of forestry (356). In essence, it might also have been the predictions of changes like this that caused the capitalist-oriented culture to discredit Patricia's work originally, despite its correct findings and methods.

The scientific field of dendrology and the educational institute of forestry school seem to both follow the same set of cultural values, adhering to capitalist ideals of economic growth. Disapproval or suspicion against Patricia's research project can be seen both during her education and in her professional career as a researcher. Despite Patricia having a feeling that she has found "a whole new green world, ripe for discovery" (154) in her hypothesis about the interconnectedness of trees, her supervisor shows hesitance, particularly by questioning the *usefulness* of the study (154). The advisor, being a representative of the institution of the forestry school and the research it carries out suggests that science should be *useful* above all, or else, the researcher is wasting their time. What the study should be useful *for* is, however, left unsaid. The covert messaging here is that science should above all generate wealth, but this does not need to be stated, because the capitalist ideals are so dominant that they appear to be obvious to those who have not questioned them. Considering how the "men in charge of American forestry" (153) appear to speak mainly of "*mean annual increment* and *economic maturity*" (153), and how this represents to Patricia what is "wrong with the entire field" (153),

it is safe to say that the institution in large views usefulness as strictly adhering to economic gain, and anything that does not generate it is consequently seen as a waste of time.

The novel criticizes this limited view of scientific usefulness by showing that there is value in scientific inquiry that does not generate economic wealth, as it can aid in understanding and preserving valuable ecosystems. The culture that has as its understanding that science should have economic growth as its only incentive is problematic from an environmental point of view. This is because it fails to incentivize scientific studies that could produce the information needed to effectively reform forestry practices towards a more sustainable state. The novel shows that contemporary culture is making such scientific endeavors difficult to produce. Institutions of education are presented as lacking motivation to provide resources supporting science aimed at knowledge and sustainability and institutions of science are presented as showing a reluctance in accepting the findings they produce. In short, the culture around education and science is structured in a way where the sustainable solutions that present and future ecosystems are in dire need of are being underprioritized.

Finally, the institution of law enforcement is shown in the novel to prioritize corporations and the right to property over the lives of people, specifically the lives of those who are trying to save the forests. The bias that law enforcement shows is problematic, as it prioritizes justice for companies destroying wildlife over people trying to protect it, effectively withholding structures that are allowing it to be destroyed. The cultural values prioritizing right to property over lives of people and forests are part of the unsustainable mainstream ideology that the book portrays, and therefore an aspect of society that would need to undergo some kind of change in order for forests and trees to survive in the long term. The unsustainable cultural values being reinforced by the actions of law enforcement most can be observed in the disparity between the number of resources that it spends on the murders of peaceful activist authorities Mother N and Moses, as compared to the investigation following the arsons eventually carried out by a group of four of the protagonists, destroying lumbering companies' property. The first activist-organization that Olivia and Nick join after they have decided to take action and engage themselves in activism is the LDF. The LDF is a strictly non-violent activist group organizing tree-sits and other kinds of civil disobedience targeting lumbering companies. Despite their peaceful intentions, however, the leading figures of the group, Mother N and Moses are murdered under mysterious circumstances. LDF member Loki explains to protagonists Nick and Olivia who are out on a tree sit what has happened: "It's Mother N and Moses. [...] someone bombed the office [...] the police are saying they blew themselves up with stockpiled explosives. Accusing the LDF of domestic terrorism" (404). It is clear from the statement that

it was someone else who bombed the office, but that law enforcement is uninclined to find out the truth. Instead, they criminalize the activists. The criminalization of the activists, despite their non-violent approach is an expression of cultural priorities within law enforcement, placing the lives of counter-cultural activists on a very low level. The lack of investigation into these murders might also signify corruption within the police force, and that companies with a lot of wealth can carry out crimes without being held accountable by the law. The most credible reason for their murder is, after all, their disruption of the company Humboldt Timber's operations. If the lack of care and resources put into this investigation is compared with the long-going, rigorous investigation that followed the arsons where companies' property was destroyed (472), the disparity becomes very telling. No other option presents itself than the disparity being a consequence of cultural priorities, placing companies, wealth, and property above the lives of regular people involved in activist movements.

Overall, institutions of science, law and education are shown in the novel to enforce patriarchal and capitalist power structures in big and small ways. The institutionally enforced idea that women are unable to provide original work of scientific discovery limits the institutions of education and science, especially as feminist approaches are applicable to climate issues to such a large extent. The enforcement of capitalist ideals within education and science further limits their scope of possibility, as any inquiry that is motivated by curiosity or love of nature, and not by economic growth, appears to the proponents of mainstream culture as odd, or even threatening. Institutions of law feature ideas of ownership and entitlement that withhold structures of gender based inequality as well as exploitation of climate.

## Stories

Storytelling is a theme that is central to the concept of multifaceted cultural change that is presented in *The Overstory*. Despite their differences, many characters in the novel are involved in some kind of storytelling as part of their attempts to change the culture, or as part of their activism. Some acts in the novel that can be identified as storytelling are Patricia's book, Nick Hoel's art projects, and Adam Appich's manifestation of self-sacrifice in not turning in his accomplices. It might seem odd to introduce Adam's self-sacrifice as an act of storytelling, but this part of the essay will argue that the description is validated by the contents of the novel. My reading assesses storytelling in its broadest sense, as an action that reflects and tries to affect cultural values through education, narratives, and actions. Storytelling is presented as

one of the many ways that people can strive to change culture, perhaps the most important one, but it is also revealed as a multifaceted endeavor in itself. Storytelling in this novel is done by very different characters, using different strategies, and towards different ends.

In general, storytelling inside the novel is directed towards characters who do not understand that healthy trees and forests are important, or think, at least, that they are not important enough to scrap the capitalist business model that incentivizes the clear-cutting of old trees. The mainstream arguments and the counter-cultural arguments are presented against each other in a way that provides an overview of the discussion. In one such case, a pair of loggers provide arguments that attempt to discredit the concerns of environmental activists by saying that they are anti-human and that they “hate people” (360), that they are “killing [the loggers’] livelihood” (360), and that “It’s a crop. It grows back” (360). Some of the loggers’ arguments are reasonable to a point, like their need to feed their families (360), but the novel, through the voices of Nick and Olivia, argues that the reasoning is still deeply flawed. One way this is done is by pointing out that even the best arguments made by the loggers are short-sighted (360). Even the loggers’ need to feed their families cannot justify actions that kill off entire ecosystems, which would deny the intrinsic value of all the lives of that ecosystem, while simultaneously making it impossible for future generations to sustain themselves in the same way. The difficulty that anti-environmentalists of this book have in imagining the numerous consequences of deforestation, despite scientific data confirming them, is descriptive of what Ghosh figures as “the broader imaginative cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis” (8). It is the broader cultural failure that makes the loggers, and many other characters in the novel, unable to imagine the consequences of clear cutting all old-growth. The loggers themselves are not presented as villains. Instead, the cultural failure mentioned by Ghosh which makes it impossible within contemporary culture to imagine the consequences of unsustainable forestry practices is presented as the real issue. It is likely that it is this phenomenon that makes the loggers of the novel reason the way they do, and it is precisely this cultural failure of the imagination that the storytellers in this novel try to change.

Patricia is one of the major storytellers of the novel, and with her stories she strives, above all, to educate people about trees and forests. The book she writes educates people about the contents of her research in a narrative and appealing fashion. Her agent says that she makes trees “come alive” (208) in her book, which hints at the importance of creating compelling stories out of the stuff of knowledge to impact people. Her book is shown throughout the novel as a force that influences people. The people impacted by the book are partly anonymous characters that send mail to Patricia saying how their view on trees has changed (322), and

partly, it is read by other main characters of the book, inspiring their endeavors of wilderness preservation further (575).

Nick Hoel's method of storytelling, on the other hand, follows the more open-ended approach of art-making, where the process of observation and creation takes on a sense of importance while the end goal remains undetermined. Nick is an artist who grew up on a farm in rural Iowa. On this farm, and in Nick's family, there is a long-standing tradition that involves taking pictures every month of a chestnut tree planted at the farm by Nick's ancestor. Nick's approach to storytelling is explained by this project, as the project as well as Nick's art both focus on long-term observation while acknowledging the outward pointlessness of the endeavor. It is said that "neither his grandparents nor his father could explain to him the point of the thick flip-book" (22), but still, the value it has is undeniable. Nick's grandfather says, for instance, that it "[m]akes you think different about things, don't it?" (22). This sentence is then repeated as one of the things that Nick learns about art in an art school in Chicago, where it is implied that art, too, "[m]akes you think different about things, don't it?" (24). The knowledge acquired by long observation, condensed into a sequence of images flipped through quickly shows the tree in a way becomes meaningful. The images seem to those that watch them to be able to capture and show people something deeper and truer about trees than what can be seen with one's own eyes because they grow so slowly. This different perspective of time is part of what Nick is trying to teach people with his art, even if putting a distinct 'goal' to his artistic projects would be a way of misunderstanding them.

Adam Appich comes to believe in the power of storytelling as a result of his upbringing and his education in psychology. Having been bullied as a child and submitted to the adverse consequences of group psychology, Adam becomes interested in the human mind, and the ways that reason is often sacrificed for people to continue to live within the cultural world of human society. The tendency to prioritize confirmation from others above reasonable thinking is presented by the novel as a flaw in humankind that is likely to cause its extinction (106). The tendency is shown more succinctly through the idea of the "bystander effect", the observed psychological phenomenon that makes humans less likely to intervene in potentially dangerous situations if they can see that a large group of people is observing it alongside them. Adam realizes that the bystander effect might apply to how climate crisis works on a very large scale. What he also realizes, however, is that knowing about such psychological biases does not make one less inclined to commit them, he is taught that "learning psychology is, indeed, pretty much useless" (293). It is through this development that he turns to the idea of impactful stories, coming to see acts of storytelling as the only way in which a person's mind can be allowed to

see beyond the psychological bias of adhering to the cultural world of the masses. He turns this idea of cultural change through storytelling into action through his decision to face two lifetimes in prison for burning the properties of lumbering companies and pleading guilty to terrorism, instead of turning the other arsonists in and receiving a lowered sentence, as a way of manifesting the idea that he sticks with his beliefs of forest preservation even when they generate consequences in his life.

The reason that his actions can be considered a kind of storytelling becomes visible when another of the protagonists who participated in the arsons thinks about his incarceration as symbolic: “That’s what he has tried to make. That’s why he let the state put him away for two life sentences and still incriminated no one. He has traded his life for a fable that might light up the minds of strangers. One that refuses the judgement of *the world* and all its blindness” (607, italics in original). The use of the word “fable” here indicates that the action constitutes a kind of story. Also, the italicized *world* being referred to is the cultural world where confirmation from the status quo is more important than facts and reasoning, an idea that Adam finds deeply misguided as it allows for destruction of nature to continue despite its potentially catastrophic consequences, and which he consequently tries to change with his storytelling.

All the acts of storytelling in the novel show potential to influence other people, as is captured by the statement that “[t]he best arguments in the world won’t change a person’s mind, the only thing that can do that is a good story” (607, italics in original). Adam’s “fable” has the potential of showing people that they must adopt a way of thinking where trees are protected despite the short-term and the individual consequences, and despite the fact that many others seem uninclined to recognize their disappearance as a problem. Similarly, Nick Hoel’s art has the potential of teaching people to look at the world through a slower and larger perspective. Patricia’s book does become concretely influential in its educational aspirations, as we can see how other characters in the book become motivated by it, not least Dorothy Cazaly/Brinkman and Ray Brinkman who start a private revolution against the culture of their neighborhood by letting their garden grow freely as a result of reading the book (575).

Despite the novel’s seeming optimism towards stories, however, there is at the same time a lingering hesitance when it comes to the actual influence that these stories can have on the minds of people in general. Firstly, it is said that Adam has “traded his life for a fable that *might* light up the minds of strangers” (607, italics added), which leaves it completely possible that it does not. It also leaves the possibility open that despite his efforts, climate catastrophe still strikes. Adam is sure that it will: “That cataclysm will still come, he’s sure of it, long before

his seventy plus seventy years are up” (598). When it comes to Nick’s art, the optimism is not much greater. The art piece that Nick finishes at the very end of the novel will show the word “STILL” (624) as visible from space in the greenery that grows from the logs of dead trees that he has arranged with the help of local Native Americans. Despite Nick and the people who helped him agreeing that the piece is “good” (624), there is an awareness that maybe only a few AI robots devised by another of the protagonists will puzzle over the message before it “fade[s] back into the swirling patterns, the changing rain and air and light” (625). The actual influential power that the art piece can have in conveying hope in regrowth, for instance, remains speculative and is left depending on many uncertain factors in the future. The book that Patricia writes, while its effects are more concretely visible in the novel, might still only attract individuals that were already on board with the message in the first place. This is certainly true for all of the main characters who are influenced by her book, and the people who send her mail show no inclination of having been previously against environmentalism. In the end, even the reach of the influence of Patricia’s best-selling book is left somewhat undetermined. The message of the novel should not be understood as art and stories being useless in influencing culture to address climate change, but it is clear that cultural change if it is possible, happens on a larger scale than what can be observed from the impact of single acts of narration and storytelling.

## **Interconnected Activism**

The bigger picture of cultural change can be seen in the way that the kinds of activism in *The Overstory* interconnect. The connection takes place across different levels of scale, with ‘big-scale activism’ influencing ‘small-scale activism’. Patricia’s book, for instance, is read by a presumably large number of people, and Nick’s activist art videos feature on national television, reaching thousands (290). For this reason, they could be understood as instances of ‘big-scale activism’. However, not all activism in the novel involves conveying messages to big groups of strangers. Dorothy and Ray, for instance, launch their resistance movement by letting their garden grow wildly, despite this being against the conventions and rules of the neighborhood (575). The delimited territory and the limited number of people that this act of activism affects might allow us to call it ‘small-scale activism’. What is fascinating about the different kinds of activism in the book is that they are connected. Dorothy and Ray’s decision to let their garden grow wildly is informed and inspired by their reading of Patricia’s book.

What this portrays is a large-scale activist endeavor inspiring a small-scale one. The relationship between big-scale activism and small-scale activism in the book is especially noteworthy as it contains similarities to the physiology of forests that is presented in the novel, with big and old trees spawning and nurturing multitudes of smaller trees in a network system (276). While this connection is not explicitly stated in the novel, the fact that the entire structure of the book has been named after the physiology of a tree affords interpretations of how different phenomena in the book are linked to the physiology of trees and forests.

What a multifaceted cultural change consists of, according to the novel, might then best be understood as multiple simultaneous and individual endeavors of activism, that are interconnected in a web similar to the communicative mycorrhizal network of a forest, and where the most influential voices can inspire the rest of society to carry out small deeds of activism in their everyday life. In such a metaphor, it would seem like the storytellers are the big trees, as they reach and inspire most people in the book, and the smaller trees are the individuals who carry out deeds that align with the message of forest preservation in their everyday life. This places the act of storytelling in its correct position, not as a complete solution for cultural change in itself, but as a valuable part of the bigger network of cultural change.

## **The Novel's Impact**

Since *The Overstory* features so much discussion about storytelling and its potentially transformative effects, it can be used, partly, to discuss its own potential usefulness in changing the contemporary culture of the real world. Since the novel has been read by a large number of people, and again, manages to move beyond many cultural limitations of novelistic depictions of large-scale climate exploitation, there is a possibility that it has changed how a large number of people think about trees, and what they are willing to do to preserve old-growth forests where they still exist. For instance, Barack Obama is cited on the back of the book, saying that “[i]t changed how [he] thought about the Earth and our place in it” (Vintage Books). While this is just one person, the decision to promote the quote is relevant. Obama is a symbol of American society in that he has been president for eight years. When a central cultural and political figure is cited as having changed his view as a result of the book, it sends a message to American society in large, suggesting that the book could have the power to change other Americans' views on forests and trees.

Another way of discussing the possibility of cultural change as a result of the novel might lie in the aforementioned metaphor of cultural change and the network found in vital forests. Perhaps the novel can act as a cultural “mother tree”, changing readers’ perspectives on trees the same way Patricia’s book does within the novel, further inspiring small acts of cultural activism as a result. Further, it is possible if enough people change their actions to a sufficient degree that culture itself can change slightly towards a more environmentally friendly state. It is after all the actions and thoughts of the masses that dictate what culture deems acceptable and not, leaving it possible in the future that the same psychological tendencies that are withholding cultures of exploitation could work the other way, producing an increasingly ecocentric cultural landscape. This novel could, in other words, serve as one of the big trees in the network of cultural change that would inspire others to spread the message and take concrete action.

At the same time, the limitations that stories within the novel have in their ability to change culture might apply to the novel itself, too. When asked about what he thinks the influence of the book will be in an interview, Powers says that he does not know what stories can do (Shakespeare and Company Bookshop). The uncertainty about the usefulness of stories shows how the novel seems to understand the potential for cultural change as depending on a lot of different factors, something which nuances the way the discussion within the book outlines its own usefulness.. The uncertainty regarding storytelling’s ability to change culture show also in that the book is full of premonitions of a doomed humanity (70, 106, 113, 424). Patricia, who appears to do so much to change culture, explains to her partner Dennis how she believes, too, that the future of humanity is doomed: “Den. How is extraction ever going to stop? It can’t even slow down. The only thing we know how to do is grow [...] Growth, all the way up to the cliff and over. No other possibility” (380). What this shows is that the novel allows for the possibility that all of the storytelling it presents will still fail to produce sufficient change to culture to adequately combat climate change. Altogether, the undefined usefulness of stories in the novel results in a sense of hope and despair existing side by side in the novel, and this paradoxical state seems to sum up the perspective the novel has on the possibility for human culture to change in response to the Anthropocene in general, being one of thoroughly explored and deeply nuanced uncertainty.

## Conclusion

To summarize, ideas of cultural change are explored to a great length in *The Overstory*, and they are presented in relation to concrete issues that are found in the mainstream culture and the societal institutions of the United States. The novel can be said to reinforce ideas of non-identitarian ecocentric ethics by attempting to render trees as objects for which we can feel kinship and empathy while recognizing their otherness as non-human entities. Examples of the ways that characters attempt to create cultural change range from small-scale activism carried out outside of the public eye in a specific location to a larger scale of influence in activism that targets the whole system of thought that dominates society. The different kinds of activism present in the novel are presented as highly individual and based on aspects of personality, family history, and ideas of identity, while still occurring in a way that is interconnected between different people. The symbiosis of individualist and communal activism present in the book is possible to interpret as allegorical to the concept of the interconnectedness of the mycorrhizal network of a forest and shows cultural change as a larger and more intricate phenomenon than what can be understood by looking only at any one of its parts alone. The role that storytelling has is central to the concept of cultural change as outlined by the novel and affords a discussion about the novel itself in relation to contemporary culture and the ongoing discussions and goals of ecocritical inquiry. In the end, storytelling, as well as human capacity for cultural change remain undetermined in the novel. Still, the novel sheds new light on the complexity of the question of cultural change, continuing the discussion of human life and culture in the time of the Anthropocene.

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