

‘Treeing’ The Issue of Interdisciplinary Knowledge

Scale Awareness and Thinking With Trees in Richard Powers’
The Overstory

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INTRODUCTION

After its publication in 2015, the book *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* by German forester Peter Wohlleben aroused significant controversy in the scientific field. Although it became a bestseller and was publicly acclaimed for the way it describes the countless wonders of trees, a part of the scientific community responded with an online petition against the book’s poetic use of anthropomorphism, metaphors, and a general emotionality in its approach to nature. The petition states that Wohlleben presents a form of ‘unenlightened thinking’—harking back to the early modern world before the Enlightenment where science and imagination were more or less merged—and that the work should not be classified as popular ‘science’ (University Göttingen, 2017). The petition’s title crisply captures the community’s disapproval of a too literary delivery of scientific knowledge: ‘Even in the Forest, It’s Facts We Want Instead of Fairy Tales.’ In defense of facts against fairy tales, of science against literature, these scientists perform a type of ‘boundary work.’ The concept of boundary work, raised by sociologist Thomas F. Gieryn, refers to the demarcation of science from other intellectual activities. Although this is meant largely by Gieryn (1983) as ‘the ideological style in scientists’ attempts to create a public image for science by contrasting favourably to non-scientific intellectual or technical activities’ (781), demarcating the boundaries of science also means carving out a distinct disciplinary practice of knowledge production in science, as well as the standard to valorize certain knowledge according to the way it is produced.

One of the major points of critique towards Wohlleben’s interdisciplinary production questions the validity of the book’s presented claims after his incorporation of literary techniques. As exemplified by biologist Sharon Elizabeth Kingsland’s (2018) remark, although Wohlleben does employ ‘hard’ scientific research, providing scientifically verified biological explanations for various forest phenomena and making ‘many *valid* points about how ecological relationships operate in the forest,’ ‘his use of scientific literature ... is often a springboard to an imagined conclusion that goes beyond the scientific facts’ (4) [emphasis added]. For instance, Wohlleben provides scientific facts to explain how

ancient forests are more healthy and less likely to send off chemical signals of distress than artificially planted trees. But he takes this a step further, imagining that the light-hearted feeling of visitors when walking in ancient forests is the result of this lack of distress in the air, for we ‘intuitively register’ the fewer ‘alarm calls’ of the forest’s health (Wohlleben, 2016, 346). At such moments Wohlleben opts out of the ‘steady’ course of science into the formation of a more speculative narrative with literary color and emotional impact. This recalls Timothy Clark’s *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015), his literature-focused expansion of Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects* (2013), where he makes some observations about ecocritical literary criticism that draws on scientific theories. Clark states that in the last few years, literary and cultural criticism have been driven more and more to interdisciplinarity, discussing issues and disciplines beyond their usual scope. The difficulty with this, Clark (2015) writes, ‘is that modes of recognized intellectual procedure and a cogency of argument have depended on clear disciplinary demarcations yet these have been breaking down’ (145). Not only does the scientific community’s critique reveal an ‘allergy’ towards the crossing of alleged boundaries between fact and fiction, but it also throws a doubtful light on the form of knowledge that literary techniques or literature at large create, if literature generates knowledge at all.

A similar discussion about interdisciplinary knowledge lies at the heart of Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2018). Throughout his oeuvre, Powers has often engaged with questions about the creation of knowledge and the status of art. His novels, such as *The Echo Maker* (2007), which features the workings of the brain, and *Orfeo* (2014), which depicts a pensionary composer taking up a new hobby in DNA research, explore the borders between artistic representation and scientific knowledge. *The Overstory*, a novel in which the life and death of human characters are intricately intertwined with the pending issue of deforestation, is his first work framing knowledge production within the crisis of climate change and the literary discourse of ecocriticism. Taking the Wohlleben controversy into the scope of its literary reflection, the novel revolves around a book titled *The Secret Forest*. This fictional book, written by the dendrologist Patricia Westerford, echoes Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Taylor, 2018, 42). Like the latter work, Westerford’s book is an interdisciplinary production that employs both scientific research methods and literary techniques of representation. Powers’ novel narrates the composition process of Westerford’s book and its reception among institutions with distinct disciplinary discursive traditions, as well as among characters from all walks of life. Through this, the novel addresses the synthesis and incongruity of different disciplinary discourses that strive to work together in devising solutions to the crisis of deforestation in the age of the Anthropocene. Although the novel has been short-listed for the Man Booker Prize 2018 and laureated by critics as ‘the eco-epic of the year’ (Shapton 2018), so far it has received little scholarship, especially not on how it provides a new perspective on ecocritical narratives and knowledge production.¹ This essay situates *The Overstory* within the debate of interdisciplinary and ecocritical knowledge and argues for the role of literature in

this debate as a reflective participant, whose literary techniques rearrange the circulating disciplinary discourses in the current society and invite its readers to contemplate them with a renewed perspective.

‘TREEING’ THE NARRATIVE

The Overstory nurtures a renewed ecocritical perspective on different and interdisciplinary forms of knowledge by ‘treeing’ its narrative. Trees operate in the narrative as subjects that mediate between different spatial-temporal scales. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, Clark argues that it is difficult to locate individual responsibility for environmental issues on a global scale such as climate change. An individual action as small as driving a car may at the same time contribute to the increasing accumulation of CO₂ that harms the environment beyond the immediate lifetime and local space of an individual. Through this, individual actions are able to encompass ramified and incalculable global phenomena whose ‘proliferation of emergent effects has long exceeded the possibilities of human foresight or planning’ (Clark, 2015, p. 7). While the reason for driving a car could be put in a clear, cause-and-effect matter (driving saves time), the reason against driving a car for the sake of the environment defies such a simple explanation. Could an individual instance of driving trigger the butterfly effect of global warming? Who is to be reprimanded if, say, one drives to arrive on time at a conference for environmentalist industrial solutions? Or if one drives a dying patient to the hospital? Choosing not to drive at such instances does not necessarily shift the course of the pending climate crisis. Deforestation, as part of climate change, is situated within a positive feedback loop and at a scale that far exceeds the personal expediency and individual grasp of time and space.

Through its discussion of trees, *The Overstory* makes its readers aware of the multiple spatial-temporal scales at work in the process of deforestation. Opening with the family history of Nick Hoel, one of the protagonists, the novel introduces his family tradition - passed down onto each generation since their settlement on a farm in America in the nineteenth century - of photographing the family chestnut tree. A flipping-through of all these photos compiled in an album showcases the growth of this solo tree ‘through hundreds of revolving seasons ... growing at the speed of wood’ while ‘everything a human being might call the story happens outside this photo’s frame’ (Powers, 2018, 16). The photographic lens reveals multiple scale-framings at work because the tree’s lifespan takes place on a temporal scale that goes beyond consecutive human generations. Although the story of the family is not pictured in the photos, it is nonetheless accompanied by the presence of the tree. Presented in the photographs as an isolated individual, the chestnut’s evolving image seemingly tells a story of its independent growth. However, what is not captured within the frame is the spatial environment that helped the tree to grow. The novel directs the reader’s attention to what happens outside the photos’ frame - not only a human story but also that of trees: the fact that the tree absorbed nutrients and signals through the wind and fungal networks hidden underground with other trees and life forms. This suggests that ‘[t]here are no

individuals ... [e]very trunk depends on others' (Powers, 2018, 280) and that humanity 'never sees [trees as] whole,' always 'miss[es] the half of it, and more' (Powers, 2018, 3). The complexity of the worldwide arboreal system as a 'wood wide web' in both its temporal and spatial dimensions is beyond the total grasp of even assiduous, if not most of the time indolent, human endeavor (Wohlleben, 2016, 11).² Thus from the beginning, the novel already urges its readers to think of trees as communal beings living in a geological temporality different from the human chronotope, and to see the lives of trees as an 'overstory' in which the history of humanity takes place.³

What becomes clear in the novel is that different disciplinary approaches preemptively frame the issue of climate change on different scales. As Adam Trexler discusses in his *Anthropocene Fictions* (2015), older climate fiction often focused on single events such as one superstorm with dramatic consequences. However, more recent narratives are better equipped to showcase the distribution of the multiple effects of climate change such as tornadoes, crop failures or mass extinctions, each spanning across different time scales. In non-fictional accounts, climate change is often framed in purely scientific, political or economic terms. Trexler's new, scaled-up perspective shows how because of its comprehensiveness, the realist novel as a form can take up a specific issue such as deforestation and trace all social, political, personal, cultural and aesthetic aspects of it in a non-reductive way that engages with different levels of scale-framings. He argues that the move towards realism shows how Anthropocene fiction presents itself as a force that interacts with climate change, simultaneously remaking our cultural understanding of both the climate and the narrative dimensions of the novel (Trexler, 2015, 35).

In *The Overstory*, trees become subjects of knowledge through which various disciplinary approaches to the environmental crisis of deforestation are brought together into communications and contests. Trees are the subject of radical environmental activism, are analyzed within the context of bio-science and become part of court cases as potential legal persons. Additionally, trees serve as a source of literary imagination and become the inspiration for video game developers. As our later analysis, based on Clark's method of reading different scales apart from each other, will demonstrate, these interdisciplinary contests usually arise in the form of conflicts between different scales applied to the problem at hand. Trees in the novel are, to use Trexler's (2015) words, 'not just a 'theme' in fiction,' but that which 'remakes basic narrative operations' (233). Apart from serving as the central figure that mediates between the different spatial-temporal scales and disciplinary scale-framings, trees also shape the novel on the narratological level. With its narrated time spanning across 250 years, the novel is divided into four parts titled 'roots,' 'trunk,' 'crown,' and 'seeds,' resembling the life cycle of a tree. The introduction of each main character includes an illustration of a branch with leaves from a specific tree, which corresponds with how characters start using names of trees to refer to themselves. While these introductory chapters treat the characters like individuals, assigning each character with one individual chapter, after moving into the 'trunk' section, the characters' stories become intertwined with each other like the hidden network of the roots of trees. As the narrator comments, the characters' lives

'have long been connected, deep underground. Their kinship will work like an unfolding book' (Powers, 2018, 132) - the 'overstory' is simultaneously an 'understory'.

Through 'treeing' the narrative in both its content and narratology, the novel counters the notion that trees remain invisible although omnipresent, artfully representing both the tree as an interdiscursive figure and an arboreal way of living weaved into the narratives of human lives. Additionally, trees in the novel are not merely used as a thematic figure within the texts, as their presence is physically embodied by the book itself, made out of paper that comes from trees. In *Writing Machines* (2002), N. Katherine Hayles introduces the concept of the material metaphor. Like verbal metaphors that denote 'the transfer of sense associated with one word to another,' material metaphors refer to the traffic between words and physical artifacts (Hayles, 2002, 22). According to this view, books are material metaphors of the relation of 'words to world.' Hayles argues that literature is and has never been just an immaterial verbal construction. Instead, literary texts have a materiality or body that is deeply interwoven with the meaning of a text (Hayles, 2002, 107). *The Overstory* is a material metaphor that makes explicit the materiality of the book by being self-referential in its texts, foregrounding the physical presence of trees in the readers' reading experience.

THE COMPOSITION, RECEPTION AND PRACTICAL APPLICABILITY OF INTERDISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE

The Overstory addresses how the multi-scaled existence of trees and the interdisciplinary knowledge that it mediates is implicated and valued within the knowledge production of human society. As mentioned before, the centerpiece of the novel's narrative is an interdisciplinary production: a book written by the character Patricia Westerford. In the 1960s of *The Overstory*, Westerford discovers how trees communicate with each other and react to their environment. Her findings are initially rejected by the scientific community as an 'embarrassing misunderstanding of the units of natural selection'. Later her work is reinstated and becomes generally accepted through her bestselling book *The Secret Forest* (Powers, 2018, 127). Westerford's book in the novel bears many similarities with Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Her book describes 'loner trees' (Powers, 2018, 424), a concept which is also developed by Wohlleben (2016): 'Even in a forest, there are loners, would-be hermits who want little to do with others' (10). Westerford struggles to convey her discovery in the most scientifically accurate and also most engaging way. In an attempt to articulate her own affective relationship with trees, she describes the process of her scientific observations as a rather literary approach: she is 'learning [the trees'] foreign language' (Powers, 2018, 129). She falls back on personification and poetic metaphors, calling the dying act of a Douglas-fir, where it releases its chemicals to the ground, a 'testament'. Additionally, she names the Douglas-firs 'giving trees,' stating that the reading public needs metaphors 'to make the miracle a little more vivid, visible' (Powers, 2018, 221). This strategy works, as the media

praises Westerford's use of metaphorical language and the way in which it helps to make trees 'come alive' (Powers, 2018, 224). At the same time, she also tries to make sure that the affective appeal of her work does not become supportive of the anthropocentric view that the lives of trees are only meaningful in the eyes of the human beholders. After all, she writes in her book, 'it's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived' (Powers, 2018, 424).

Westerford's interdisciplinary work also explores different temporal and spatial scales through the use of myth. Inspired by the myth of Baucis and Philemon, her work conceives of trees as carriers of memory mediating between multiple temporal scales. In the beginning of her career, Westerford experiences a disagreement with a professor who makes a plea for cleaning up dead tree parts in the forest to improve forest health: 'She [Westerford] wants to raise her hand and say, like Ovid, how all life is turning into other things' (Powers, 2018, 122). Dead trees harbor nourishing fungi from which other trees feed and may lead to the growth of new trees. Like in the myths of Ovid, the dead tree thus becomes something else, a new form of life. In a sequel to *The Secret Forest* titled *The New Metamorphosis*, Westerford describes the myth of Baucis and Philemon, who were the only people that welcomed immortal beings in disguise into their home as guests. Rewarded by the immortals, they lived on as trees after their death. It is suggested that myths are 'memories posted forward from people standing on the shores of the great human departure from everything else that lives' (Powers, 2018, 394). Trees as the embodiment of mythical figures help to remember a time in which trees were intricately connected to immortality and humanity. Westerford's inclusion of myth within her scientific work is a productive form of poetic engagement that encompasses both the immediate present and the time immemorial.

Even though accepted as a bestseller, the discussion surrounding Westerford's book, just like Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*, showcases a constant policing of disciplinary boundaries. Additionally, it also points out a public suspicion towards expert knowledge. Called to court to testify for a case against industrial forest cuts, Westerford has to defend her interdisciplinary work and her status as an expert of forestry against the doubts of the judges, the industry owners, and the courtroom audience, even though the scientific community has valorized her research. For Westerford, forestry is more than the agglomeration of 'scientific' observations. However, when asked to prove the scientific nature of her work, she 'keeps to what the scientific community agrees on. But as she testifies, science itself starts to seem as flighty as a high school popularity contest' (Powers, 2018, 280). The opposing counsel relies on the critique of her supposedly flawed scientific methods, performing the boundary work that disqualifies Westerford's argument because it is not 'properly' scientific. The courtroom debate bogs down in a battle of metaphors versus numbers, but Westerford ultimately sways the judge by combining the discourses. She frames the poetic affect of the feelings of trees within a scientific endeavor as she makes the final statement that 'it could be the eternal project of mankind, to learn what forests have figured out' (Powers, 2018, 285). In the end, the judge returns a verdict in Westerford's favor, banning industrial logging.

Finally, Westerford's interdisciplinary work is adopted to make legal decisions about environmental matters that impose practical enforcement. With this, the plot moves from the discussion of the boundary policing of science that focuses on the validity of specific forms of knowledge, to the practical impact of the knowledge. How is it transferred into practical applications and what are the complications that arise during the process? As someone reminds Westerford, the pending ban on industrial logging will only increase the speed with which timber firms are cutting trees and so the court decision is later revoked. A similar conundrum occurs at a conference titled 'Home Repair: Countering a Warming World' (Powers, 2018, 436), where Westerford is invited to talk about the role of trees in building a sustainable future but finds herself unable to meet the expectations of the audience. People attending the conference expect technical solutions, but all Westerford can offer is a talk about the workings of trees, 'a device so beautiful it's the stuff of poems' (Powers, 2018, 436) that seems difficult to be applied practically.

The discussion of the applicability of Westerford's interdisciplinary work is extended to the reception of her work by the individual characters of the novel. Her work is a centerpiece around which the entire narrative revolves. All main characters read *The Secret Forest*, but the novel makes a distinction between the extent to which these characters are individually affected, as well as the solution to deforestation that they each envisage from their own life experiences and disciplinary backgrounds. A large part of the narrative is taken up by characters who are involved in radical and illegal environmental activism. By the time they encounter Westerford's book, they are already deeply involved with their activist movements. Our close reading will focus on the other non-activist protagonists, in particular the property lawyer Ray Brinkman and the programmer/game developer Neelay Mehta, whose encounters with Westerford's book fundamentally reshape their worldviews, change their course of life or prompt them into new courses of actions that articulate a strong response towards the crisis of trees.⁴

Introduced together with his wife Dorothy as 'two people for whom trees mean almost nothing' (Powers, 2018, 64), Ray has, however, already an ambiguous intuition about the way trees and himself are related that he cannot yet articulate. He experiences a daunting feeling of something incomprehensible happening to him when playing the role of a tree in community theatre but rapidly forgets the incident. Similarly, when reading a book about the rights of trees, he has a strong emotional response to the text as he does not know 'whether to throw it across the room and laugh or to set it on fire and kill himself' (Powers, 2018, 247). His intense reaction points to the ambiguity about what he believes trees are and about the relationship he has, as a human, with trees. Nonetheless, it is also an act that results from an interdisciplinary intrusion, as the knowledge of trees as sentient beings unsettles the boundaries of his work as a property lawyer. Suddenly he has to treat trees not as objects that belong to legal persons, but as subjects that are legal persons themselves. This disruption of his previous disciplinary knowledge on the legal constitution of trees reaches a climax when after watching news footage of environmentalist

actions against deforestation - an instance where the characters' lives become intertwined - Ray experiences a stroke that leaves him in a vegetative state for several weeks.

It is in this physically immobilized state caused by severe brain damage and being barely able to say a few syllables, that Ray confronts the emotional dimension of the life of trees and his relationship with trees. The former ambiguity is puffed away after Dorothy reads Westerford's *The Secret Forest* to him. The interdisciplinary hybridization of the book provides him with a cognitive framework to ground his earlier feelings about trees that exceeds a specific legal discourse. Ray starts to perceive trees as beings that mediate multiple spatial-temporal scales through the book's explanation for the way trees move and communicate with each other. Sensing the astonishing complexity of nature on a scale much bigger than his own miniature life, he 'can watch the dozen bare trees in the backyard for hours and see something intricate and surprising' (Powers, 2018, 458). At the same time, these understandings based on explanations of the biological workings of trees are juxtaposed with the grand interspecies history of the interactions between trees and the human social-cultural world. Because the lifespan of a tree encompasses many human generations, trees are present in the unfolding of human lives and families. Ray's emotional connection with trees extends beyond the scientific as the trees in his garden become a locus for his imagination. The Brinkmans' create a fantasy life with an imaginative daughter that they were unable to have and this is a life whose images evolve 'against the shadowy trees' in their yard as their imaginative daughter comes of age (Powers, 2018, 459).

However, the novel complicates this individual emotional relationship with nature that has developed through interdisciplinary knowledge, by questioning if such emotional relationships could promote practical solutions to the issue of deforestation. In contemplating if the law could provide a solution to deforestation via legislation that recognizes trees as legal persons, Ray reaches an intellectual impasse and dies at the thought that 'imminent [action to save trees], at the speed of people, is too late. The law must judge imminent at the speed of trees' (Powers, 2018, 498). The incongruous juxtaposition of 'imminent,' which signifies immediacy and speed, and 'the speed of trees,' which is a rather slow growth, betrays the intellectual conflict involved when addressing an issue of such spatial-temporal complexity as deforestation. The conflict between a strong environmental awareness to save the lives of trees and the reality that this cannot be practically implemented in law kills Ray. His death casts a dark shadow over the practical applicability of interdisciplinary knowledge as such. Inherently multi-scaled, such forms of interdisciplinary knowledge, when put to practical application, cause insurmountable scale conflicts.

These concerns about the reception and applicability of interdisciplinary knowledge are also visible in Neelay Mehta's encounter with Westerford's book that fundamentally shifts the orientation of his coding career. Falling out of the tree as a child, Neelay catches a glimpse of the trees' lives on a biological scale often invisible to humans. During the painful shock when reaching the ground, he sees the trees'

‘networks of conjoined cells pulsing with energy and liquid sun ... the most perfect piece of self-writing code that his eyes could hope to see’ (Powers, 2018, 103). The crash leaves Neelay paralyzed for the rest of his life, and in the novel, this state of being is cast as approximating the human embodiment of a tree. His limbs are described as looking ‘like a bundle of twigs’ (Powers, 2018, 191), and ‘leaves will grow from his fingers’ (Powers, 2018, 412). Similarly to Ray, Neelay experiences a connection to trees that he cannot precisely articulate yet. While driving around in his wheelchair in the garden of his university, he experiences the reception of a message from the huge trees to build a complex computer game where gamers conquer, expand, interact, store and hoard over the ever-expanding game continent. After this particular experience, he often revisits natural environments to receive further counseling, but the trees mostly remain silent. It is only after reading Westerford’s *The Secret Forest*, which he treats like ‘divine dictation’ (Powers, 2018, 412), that Neelay realizes that he must build a game in which the resources are limited and the player must help the world evolve by taking care of nature. Moreover, he gradually develops a view on how environments may be saved in reality, beyond the world of his video game.

In the last section of the novel, Neelay releases self-learning algorithms into the world that survey the ways all forms of life and non-life are connected to discover ‘what it would take for people to unisicide,’ that is, to stop human behavior which is destructive to the environment that constitutes the living space for humanity itself (Powers, 2018, 482). Neelay’s algorithms operate data streams on a scale incomprehensible to humans, ‘shap[ing] the world’s data so quickly that the knowledge of humans stands still’ (Powers, 2018, 487). This technology crosses the temporal and spatial threshold of human existence. Neelay thus bypasses the scale conflicts that confront Ray and ultimately become his death, for it is no longer an individual mind that attempts to find a solution, but algorithms that calculate on a scale beyond human comprehension. However, despite Neelay’s optimism about this stage of reparation, one cannot help but notice the dystopian undertones in the text as it states how the developing algorithms could become destructive forces for ‘it wants solutions to problems that nothing alive yet knows how to solve, and it’s willing to use even death to find them’ (Powers, 2018, 496). The fact that an algorithmic solution, although with the best intentions, may prioritize the livelihood of earth over the human species indicates the danger of conceiving the environmental issue solely at a grand scale that neglects basic human pursuits.

CONCLUSION

At the heart of *The Overstory* is the conflict between an understanding of climate change demanding visions broader and more comprehensive than one particular discipline allows, and the scale conflicts or disastrous scale effects that arise when the interdisciplinary knowledge is put into practical application. The close-reading of the reception and composition of Westerford’s work shows the struggle involved

in the constant policing of disciplinary boundaries and the applicability of interdisciplinary work. While *The Overstory* affirms the value of interdisciplinary knowledge in moving people into action, the way in which Ray and Neelay engage with knowledge about trees on different scales, as well as the deaths associated with their behavior, points out that its practical implications may not be the positive changes that society desires. Furthermore, Powers' novel is an example of how literary narratives contribute to the current circulating debates surrounding the valorization and productivity of interdisciplinary knowledge. The novel endows the interdisciplinary debates (not limited to that of science and literature) with a fresh perspective by 'treeing' the narrative. It shows how humans can listen to the message of trees as lives mediating between multiple spatial-temporal scales and transcribes it as a scale awareness that approaches the interdisciplinary conflicts which the characters encounter as scale conflicts.

Through an awareness of scales, and through organizing the narratives of human characters as the life cycle of trees on the narratological level, the novel subtly presents the life of trees as interwoven with human lives. In the novel, Ray remarks that 'to be human is to confuse a satisfying story with a meaningful one [and] the world is failing precisely because no novel can make the contest for the world seem as compelling as the struggle between a few lost people' (Powers, 2018, 383). Yet the novel seems to make exactly the case that the contest for the world, even as a struggle between a few lost characters, cannot be separated from the broader world that they inhabit — 'It's a World of Trees' (Powers, 2018, 424). The novel demonstrates that the characters are not merely thinking *about* trees, but *with* them. The interdisciplinary knowledge *about* trees that these minds think through encroaches upon them affectively and epistemically: their mind is 'treeing,' scaling up and down, imagining time and space beyond humanity. Powers' literary narrative shadows the interdisciplinary debates with the ubiquitous presence of trees. *The Overstory* practices what Donna Haraway (2016) calls 'speculative fabulation,' a type of narration that is 'committed to strengthening ways to propose near futures, possible futures,' and - to further Trexler's nod to realism as well as the novel's disturbing moments of death and dystopian imaginations - 'implausible but real nows' (136).

Despite the implausibilities, impasses and scale conflicts, *The Overstory* places lures in them by channeling the presence of trees throughout. As Haraway states in a documentary by Fabrizio Terranova (2016), these are "lures susceptible of bringing forth today possibilities that were already in situations". As this essay has shown, the 'lure' of literary narratives is an affective-epistemological one. What kind of knowledge does literature produce? What does literature add to interdisciplinary debates such as the climate change discussion? Particularly in the case of *The Overstory*, the lure lies in the omnipresence of trees, of the narratives converging like trees and characters taking up and absorbing the episteme of trees. In this way, the world in the novel – and maybe also the world outside of the novel – is going somewhere, is 'treeing'. "[Characters] are humans on their way to turning into greener things" (Powers, 2018) – despite the pain, death and dystopian visions along the way. The lure is indeed, hope.

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1 With the exception of academic reviews such as Bron Taylor's 'Animism, Tree-consciousness, and the Religion of Life'. Josephine Donovan's 'Ethical Mimesis and Emergence Aesthetics' (2019), which reads *The Overstory* in terms of emergence aesthetic theory, is the most recent scholarly article on the novel that engages with the question of nature and ecocriticism.

2 'Wood wide web' refers to the soil fungi of a forest that 'connects vegetation in an intimate network that allows the sharing of an enormous amount of information and goods' (Wohlleben, 2016, p. viii).

3 Donovan notes that "[i]n becoming eco-activists, [characters'] lives intertwine like the branches of trees that form the canopy in a forest, emerging thus as 'an overstory' (the technical term for such a canopy)" (7). In this article, we expand the notion of overstory.

4 The fact that both Ray and Neelay, two disabled characters, have these emotional relationships with trees can be read as a problematic and ableist argument. Their disability that results in immobility can be read as a trope that they become trees themselves and seems to assert that only through being disabled can one be truly attuned to nature because one is excluded from the 'fully functioning human' society.