“Old Trees Are Our Parents”: Old Growth, New Kin, Forest Time

Kathleen Woodward

We are aged by culture, as Margaret Gullette has perfectly put it, her emphasis placed on the negative associations sutured to being old in capitalist societies. What would it mean to be aged by trees? To grow old with trees as our companion species? To understand that “old trees are our parents,” embracing the knowledge that we humans share a lineage with trees? I approach these questions through the prism of the magisterial novel *The Overstory* (2018) by the American writer Richard Powers, singling out three scenes that offer parables of post-human aging: first, humans humbled in comparison with trees in terms of longevity; second, a new understanding of what constitutes the genetic lifeworld of *Homo sapiens*; third, deep knowledge of the green world on the part of humans who have learned across their lifetimes and into their seventies to embrace the wisdom of trees. If the first scene calls up feelings of awe, including the sublime, the second engenders feelings of family and kinship across species, and the third, the consolations offered by the guidance of trees, developed over the long evolutionary temporality of forest time. Forest time: the timescale, or agescale, of the life and death of trees ***mediates*** the timescales of geological long time, the emergence of life on the planet, the time of human history, and the life span of *Homo sapiens*. I focus on four of the major characters who, some seventy years old at the end of the novel, exemplify old growth, simultaneously feeling they belong to a forest world that is both vital and old, a sanctuary, and envisioning a regreening of the planet that is in grievous peril of being stripped of its forests. Methodologically this essay is an experiment in multi-species literary ethnography through close reading of a single contemporary novel, which has had an extraordinary impact, and in the context of recent transformative research on trees. The evocative phrase “old trees are our parents” comes from the nineteenth-century American naturalist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau, suggesting a literary lineage as well as a genetic lineage across species—humans and trees.

> Old trees are our parents, and our parents' parents, perchance. If you would learn the secrets of Nature, you must practice more humanity than others. The thought that I was robbing myself by injuring the tree did not occur to me, but I was affected as if I had cast a rock at a sentient being…
>
> —Henry David Thoreau, October 23, 1855

> The world had six trillion trees, when people showed up. Half remain. Half again more will disappear in a hundred years. Half again more will disappear, in a hundred years.
>
> —Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

Age is a relational concept, with gradations of young and old typically measured in relation to others of the same species. In a recent essay on how we might bring together age studies and the environmental humanities to address matters of aging in the urgency of planetary degradation,[1] I suggested that we add a comparative dimension, extending the study of aging across species and focusing on longevity and two concepts of measurement associated with it—life span and life expectancy. In that spirit, I turn my attention in this essay to the form of life we call trees—our relation to them, their relation to us, our mutual entanglements. My focus is on the fictional trees we find in Richard Powers's magisterial novel *The Overstory*, published in 2018.[2] Methodologically I imagine this essay as a fledgling experiment in

[1] Woodward, "Ageing in the Anthropocene: The View From and Beyond Margaret Drabble's *The Dark Flood Rises.*"

[2] For recent work on fictional trees, see Carmen Concilio's *Trees in Literature and the Arts,* an edited collection of original essays largely inspired by *The Overstory*; none of the contributors explicitly pursue the question of aging as a major theme. Related, however, is Daniela Fargione's excellent essay on time: "Tree Photography, Arboreal Timescapes, and the Archive in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*." Many other essays on *The Overstory* consider the role of trees as non-human others as indices of the posthuman but none, to my knowledge, consider aging. Regarding the role of the aesthetic affective modalities in *The Overstory* designed to open our minds to the marvelous world of trees, see Pia Masiero's ""The tree is saying things in words before words."" See also the issue of *Green Letters* devoted to "Arboreal Imaginaries: An Introduction to the Shared Cultures of Trees

multi-species literary ethnography through close reading of his novel, one that has been translated into many different languages and has had an extraordinary impact.

My thoughts about aging in the Anthropocene—through the frame of post-human aging, with humans having much to learn from the worlds of trees, forging new relationships and ways of being—have been powerfully shaped by *The Overstory* and the many recent books and articles about trees and forests it has inspired me to read.[3] Although aging is not a central preoccupation in the novel, the longevity of trees in relation to the life span of humans is a main theme as is, for four of the main characters, a life-sustaining connection in their old age to the green world: their seventies are figured as a period of *old growth* that is graced by *new kin* and appreciation of *forest time*. Trees are their elders. My ardent wish is that many more people will read *The Overstory*, allowing its language and characters, its scenes and narrative arcs, to become a part of their lives. For I strongly believe that works of the literary imagination have the potential to do critical cultural work. So too do other readers of *The Overstory* who, we learned on the website of Goodreads in 2020, say this is their favorite quotation from the book: "The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story" (336).

We are aged by culture, as Margaret Gullette has perfectly put it, her emphasis placed on the negative associations sutured to being old in capitalist societies. What would it mean to be aged by trees? To be aged *with* trees? Or better, to *grow old* with trees as our companion species? To understand with the nineteenth-century American author Henry David Thoreau that "old trees are our parents," embracing the knowledge that we humans share a lineage with trees? To be inspired by the experience of fictional characters in old age

---

and Humans," edited by Solvejg Nitzke and Helga Braunbeck, with perspectives predominantly from literary and cultural studies.

[3] While there is much theoretical work devoted to the posthuman, there is little dedicated to posthuman aging. The conference on the Posthumanist Turn in Ageing Studies, referenced above, is one important exception. So is Amelia DeFalco's essay "Posthuman Care and Posthumous Life in *Marjorie Prime*"; both she and I believe that, as she puts it, "fictional texts can serve as catalysts for the theorization of care in its more than human complexities" (283). While she focuses on technological assistance in the form of AI providing care, I focus on the organic world. See also the theoretical essay by health geographer Gavin Andrews and political scientist Cameron Duff, "Understanding the Vital Emergence and Expression of Aging"; it draws on the work of such thinkers as Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, and Karen Barad.

and by the work of people in late life who live in concert with trees and advocate on their behalf? *The Overstory* serves as a guide. We would listen to sounds at the "lowest frequencies," sounds we have not heard before: the language of trees (3). We would honor the science of the biosocial planetary world in which we make our home. We would be humbled. We would be strengthened, understanding "old growth" in relation to humans as well as to forests, with old growth entailing dimensions of strength and vulnerability. Ideally we would dwell in the embrace of our kinship with the enlivening world, living in multi-species communities with trees, our relationships characterized by respect and care. We would also experience a new sense of time bequeathed to us by our knowledge of the life span of trees, with the temporality, or scale, of *forest time* opening up palpable understanding of the long history of the living world and the precarity of the planet at this point in the age of the Anthropocene.

We would recognize that many of us live in environments wonderfully populated by numerous old ones, by non-human others who are old[4]—trees, their longevity far exceeding ours. One of the great gifts of trees is that they serve as an antidote to the toxin that is ageism. We don't judge the social worlds of trees to be decisively weakened by their old members. On the contrary, they set an example. We honor their great age. Compare this with today's ageist human societies where an increasingly aging population is routinely represented as a national catastrophe in the making, stoking what I call statistical panic.[5] As Stephen Katz has recently and astutely suggested, it is time to shift from the relentless focus on the omnipresent category of "population" as a way of approaching aging, and seek instead alternative ways to understand older people "in their relationships with other generations, environments, and non-human forms of life."[6] This is the approach I take in "Old Trees Are Our Parents," with my attention on the non-human forms of life that are trees.[7]

---

[4] Gavin Andrews, "All-world Aging: A Gero of All Things under the Material Press in Time."
[5] See my essay "Feeling Frail and National Statistical Panic: Joan Didion in *Blue Nights* and the American Economy at Risk."
[6] See Stephen Katz, "*Population:* Is It Time to Revisit This Term in Aging Research?" Katz mentions the feminist emphasis on kin-making as a fruitful path, one I take up in this essay.
[7] In terms of the critical literature about human relationships with non-human others, far more attention has been devoted to non-human animal species than to plant species. Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet*, a signal contribution to the former, draws on her relationship with her dog as exemplary of companionship across species that is reciprocal and co-creative. Anna Tsing's *The*

Almost forty years ago the eminent American field biologist E.O. Wilson coined the term biophilia, insisting that as human beings we have an innate tendency to affiliate with forms of life, to connect with the natural world which is permeated with aesthetic value.[8] We are a part of it. Wilson and contemporary theorists of the post-human—those who draw our attention to our kinship with other beings—join hands here. More recently, ethnographer of Australian Aboriginal peoples Deborah Bird Rose has called for attentiveness to "situated connectivities that bind us into multi-species communities" (87). Health geographer Gavin Andrews, in far-reaching work drawing on a multi-species and multi-systems approach under the rubric of posthumanist aging, suggests that seeing "ourselves as part of a bigger aging world" might "help foster greater care for and unity with that aging world" (57). Appreciating the world of life, living—and dying—in tune with it and as a part of it: this is a step toward an ecology of being, offering a sense of belonging to something elemental, something *vital* and *old,* and hopefully providing us, as we prepare to leave life—as individuals, perhaps as a species—paradoxically with a sense of place.

*

Forests and trees are central to *The Overstory.* Forests are characters, trees are actors, not a backdrop or incidental part of the scenery. Animating the lives of the nine main human characters—four of whom Powers follows into old age—are particular trees, specific species of trees: the chestnut, the mulberry, the maple, the banyan tree, the redwood, the beech, and the oak, among them. The novel is populated with a myriad other species as well, countless more, an abundance of the sheer variety of life in the shape of trees, their differences from each other so extraordinarily more varied than are the very-so-slight differences among humans (some ten thousand species of trees have been identified[9]). The diversity is dazzling.

Some of the main human characters in *The Overstory* grow up with trees key

---

Mushroom at the End of the World, an ethnography of the Matsuke mushroom in the context of capitalism, is a welcome instance of the latter. Neither of them consider the aging of species as a key theme.

[8] Concerned with the world-wide disappearance of species and a love for the natural world, Wilson's book *Biophilia* was published in 1986, appearing during the time in which *The Overstory* is set.

[9] Forest canopy biologist Nalini Nadkarni provides this figure in *Beneath Earth and Sky: Our Intimate Connection to Trees* (33).

to their childhoods. Others come passionately to trees later on. From across the United States, five of these characters intersect in the late seventies in California midway through the novel by virtue of their ardent commitment to the well-being and very survival of trees, trees at risk of being murdered by corporations whose business it is to cut them down.[10] The plot, such as it is, is set in motion in great part by the activism on the part of these characters. Their protests and stand-offs on behalf of trees invariably turn horrifically violent, with aftermaths unforeseen.

In what follows I set aside the acts of violence and single out three scenes in *The Overstory* that offer us what I consider parables of post-human growing old, aging, and death, engaging matters that are profoundly interrelated. First, the recognition of the humble place of humans in relation to trees in terms of longevity. Second, the new understanding offered by recent discoveries of what constitutes the genetic lifeworld of *Homo sapiens*. Third, deep knowledge of and gratitude for the green world on the part of humans who have learned across their lifetimes and into their seventies to listen to the wisdom of trees and accept their teachings. If the first scene calls up feelings of awe, including the sublime, the second engenders feelings of family and kinship across species, and the third, the consolations offered by the guidance of trees, developed over the long evolutionary temporality of forest time, what Powers characterizes as enlightenment in the Buddhist sense.

Pervading the entire novel is a capacious view of more-than-human relationships, entailing feelings of what I call *sanctuary*. These feelings matter. The fundamental issues that permeate the last years of these characters in *The Overstory* are moral, not physical, social, financial, or economic. What have they done they should not have done? What can they do at this point in their lives that is right and good? How do the worlds of trees help them address these questions? How can they open themselves to green feelings, including understanding, acceptance, and deep respect for the living world?

I focus on four of the major characters who, by the novel's end, are some seventy years old and, each in their own ways, have found a way to *grow old*, envisioning a reforestation of the planet even as nothing could appear less

[10] Ben Rawlence notes, "Fifteen billion trees—thirty million hectares of forest—are cut down every year around the globe," a predominantly capitalist practice that is a form of genocide (35). Can we say that in addition to the seeking of profit, a particular form of ageism is involved as well?

certain, given the all-consuming rapaciousness of runaway capitalism. Hope is placed in the resilience of the green world—more, the force of life itself—to survive, perhaps in the very absence of humans. Hope is placed in the future which will be underwritten in part by the knowledge yielded by the practice of science that is patient and respectful of multiple forms of life as well as by traditions of the Indigenous past and present.

Turning to scenes in the novel in close reading allows me to tell stories from *The Overstory*, stories I hope might persuade people to make the novel—and these images—part of their literary lives. They are deceptively simple. A woman in midlife gazing at a grove of aspens from a distance and then making her way into their midst; she will come to live out her life in forests. A man approaching seventy looking outside through a window at home and discovering a family tree in its frame; he triumphantly calls his wife's attention to their multi-species nuclear family. A third woman sheltering, leaning against the trunk of a pine tree in a park; she comes to accept its grace. I devote most of my attention to the first scene, which is actually two—when the character of the scientist Patricia Westerford is in her thirties, and when she is in her seventies. But I begin by turning to the life spans of trees. I will conclude with a word about efforts to extend the life span of the human species and close on an autobiographical note.

1. Old Growth and the Sublime

In *The Overstory* the human life span, in the comparative company of trees, is portrayed as altogether unexceptional with the human species in a considerably lesser mode. In the novel the idea of the Great Chain of Being that has so permeated the Western world, with the position of mankind crowning that of animals, plants, and minerals, is null and void. "*People are not*," we read, "*the apex species they think they are*" (285). "*This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived*" (425).

Highlighted instead in *The Overstory* are the expansive life spans of multiple species of trees,[11] dwarfing the outer limits of the human life span which, for our purposes, we might well place at one hundred and twenty-five.[12] Unlike

---

[11] Not all species of trees have life spans longer than that of humans. The downy birch is a case in point, surviving little beyond sixty years in northern Europe. See Rawlence, pp. 49-56. And not all extraordinarily old trees are majestic, with the bristlecone pine testifying to years of struggle. See Alex Ross, "The Past and the Future of the Earth of the Earth's Oldest Trees."

[12] See Xiao Dong, Brandon Milholland, and Jan Vijg's article in *Nature* arguing that the evidence

humans who as they move into old age typically diminish in height and strength, in the world of trees, age and size typically increase together. I suspect that for people in the United States, the first species of tree associated with a great size and longevity that comes to mind is the giant redwood of California.[13] (Wonderfully, a regal painting by the nineteenth-century German-American artist Albert Bierstadt of a forest of giant redwoods, distinguished by their height and indomitable composure, appears on the cover of *The Overstory*; miniscule by comparison in the company of these giant trees are two humans.) In fact, a key event in the novel involves a coastal redwood that is targeted by a timber company owned by a multibillion-dollar multinational. Some two thousand years old, it is a legacy tree, "the largest, strongest, widest, oldest, surest, sanest living thing" one of the main characters has ever seen; it is an individual and has a name, Mimas (262);[14] this is the noble redwood that is viciously murdered in *The Overstory* in a corporate act of arborocide. In contrast, what has been identified as "exceptional longevity" in humans in so-called developed countries is associated with living to the age of eighty-five.[15]

Other long-lived species of trees abound in *The Overstory.* Patricia judges a magnificent Douglas-fir to be six centuries old (142). The life span of the American chestnut, a tree important to so many characters in the novel, is two to three hundred years old. The enormous banyan tree that cushions the fall of one of the major characters—his plane was shot down during the Vietnam conflict—is three hundred years old. And there are more. These trees attain what we would do better to call a *great age* rather than *old age*, which typically carries a negative charge—from disregard to repulsion—in our ageist capitalist societies, associated as it is with loss and decay of all kinds. Instead the longevity and height of the giant redwoods, along with other trees in *The*

---

strongly suggests a natural upper limit to the life span of humans while acknowledging that genetic and pharmacological interventions with other species have shown that their lifespans can be increased. They put the upper limit for humans at 125, three years beyond the age of Jeanne Calment's death at 122.

[13] Nadkarni remarks on our fascination with the height of trees, noting in her 2008 book *Beneath Earth and Sky* that a coast redwood 379.1 feet was discovered in 2006 and accepted then as the tallest tree in the world.

[14] See Dan Kois's interview with Powers in which he identifies the age of Mimas as "almost as old as Christianity." See also Rachel Adams' illuminating essay "The Arts of Interspecies Care," in which she discusses *The Overstory* as well as Isa Lesko's book of photographs of old animals; Adams' essay is particularly unusual in focusing on work by artists who engage with species whose members we would not consider "individual" in the Western sense.

[15] See Lewina O. Lee et al, *PNAS*, 2019.

Overstory, inspire in these main human characters awe and veneration as well as intervention on their behalf, with the novel relating a sprawling story of advocacy for trees as a part of a collective and as individuals, activism that inadvertently turns violent. All in all, these trees are "giant geniuses" (244). Humans shrink in comparison, with humility being the only possible moral response.

But rather than single out giant redwoods evoking in humans the sublime, a response familiar to many, I turn to a scene in the novel that introduces longevity on an altogether different scale; it is a vast grove of trees united by a single system of roots, a forest that is a single organism, an astonishing single tree. Featured is the young scientist Patricia Westerford, a character that brings to mind two Canadian scientists, forest ecologist Suzanne Simard and botanist Diana Beresford-Kroeger, both of whose research on forests has been transformative.

Driving west across the United States relatively early in the novel, Westerford pauses in southern Utah to visit its immense aspen grove, a natural treasure unknown to far too many. Her purpose is to appreciate its achievement, to savor its monumentality, to pay homage. The sight of "one of the oldest and largest living beings on earth," covering over one hundred acres, is stunning (131). From the ridge this is what she sees—and hears: "aspens stand in the afternoon sun, spreading along the ridge out of sight. *Populus tremuloides*. Clouds of gold leaf glint on thin trunks tinted the palest green. The air is still, but the aspens shake as if in a wind. Aspens alone quake when all others stand in dead calm" (130). More than stunning, it is sublime.

If the feeling of the sublime is often associated with a formidable grandeur and a separation between humans and nature, in *The Overstory* it is also associated with the intimate. Westerford draws closer, walking into the woods, immersing herself in "this white-grey room, a pillared foyer to the afterlife," responding to its pale delicate colors, its scent, its inimitable sound (130), offering her what Beresford-Kroeger has called a "cathedral feeling" (175). It is a sacred space. A benevolent space. It is a moment of deep intimacy, suffused with aesthetic meaning and the reassuring sense of protection that there is life of some kind after death, an "afterlife." It offers an intimation of immortality, that she is literally a part of the history of life that stretches over centuries. Yet the moment is as sobering as it is enlivening. Imbued with the aspen's vitality, she is struck with anguish by its vulnerability at the hands of

clear cutters who, wielding chain saws, have been replacing trees with suburban developments. As the narrator, referring to the condos that are being built, sardonically puts it, "Someone has been out improving things" (131).[16]

Ultimately what renders Westerford's experience of the aspen grove as *sublime* is her knowledge—the fruit of her research as a scientist—of what goes on *below the ground*: that this is a single organism, with a root system itself also stretching across more than a hundred acres, a system that may be as much as a million years old.[17] A million! Unimaginable longevity. A potentially unlimited life span. The sublime: the feeling of apprehending a beautiful living whole whose scale—in size and in age—dwarfs the human. The sublime: a feeling for an old one magnificent in its great age. The sublime: discovery as knowledge made possible in very great part by her own patient practice of science.[18] Enormous, the grove is a figure of the collective and collaborative nature of trees, a unique, elaborate, even lavish embodiment of what Westerford's research has definitively revealed—that trees communicate through their root systems, signaling each other, sharing resources, protecting one another, forming a forest that exists both above and below the ground. That trees are social beings. Moreover, that there are trees who, in their great age, near death, could be said to sacrifice themselves for those younger, a prime example being that of a tree falling in the forest to make way for young trees to grow in the light, the decay of its trunk providing nourishment for still others. These trees are "ancient benefactors" (221). "There are no individuals," we read in *The Overstory*, "There aren't even separate species. Everything in the forest is the forest" (142). And for the remainder of the novel that includes Patricia Westerford. Ostracized by her profession which disdains her research, she resolves to make her life—that is, to find her

---

[16] This scene serves as an emblem of the fate of forests in North America before the hands of the settlers and timber companies, a story not unique to North America; Ireland too shared this fate as a country occupied by the English.

[17] In terms of the age of this aspen-forest, Powers cites it as close to a million years (151); Diana Beresford-Kroeger identifies its age as 1.6 million years old and names it the oldest known organism on the planet (199).

[18] Similarly, literary critic Alexis Harley notes that Darwin's reported feeling of the sublime on encountering tropical vegetation in Socégo, Brazil, was enhanced by "a heightened sense of his ability to make sense, scientifically, of the previously overwhelming experience" (58). See also Gabriele Schwab's imaginative essay on trans-species encounters in *The Overstory* in which she insists, as do I, on the importance of scientific research to their views of the world.

home—in the forest. And she does. In the novel her character serves as the locus of knowledge from vastly different traditions—the epistemology of science and the epistemology of the botanical world. In joining an old growth forest, she becomes a part of that whole, bringing with her the valuable entanglement of different traditions of knowledge. She is—the forest. For old growth forests are ecological systems, not a mere miscellany of separate trees.[19] An ecological system: it is a concept that differs radically from that of a population which is composed of atomistic, quantitative units that generate data, or what we might call statistical culture, the grouping together of people based on, for example, chronological age and where they live. As Stephen Katz has suggested, it is well past the moment to set aside population as a key conceptual tool in critical age studies and think instead in terms of ecological systems characterized by interdependencies and entanglements.

Reaching the Cascades in the Pacific Northwest, Westerford chooses first to live in the company of long-lived Douglas-firs; later in her old age she decides to cross the country and spend time in the Smoky Mountains. Living in the forest, documenting its fecundity, growing into deep understanding of the mysteries of evolution and its branchings, she authors two books. The first, *The Secret Forest,* is about her scientific discoveries and will be read by the other main characters in *The Overstory* later in the novel. The second, *The New Metamorphosis*, written in her seventies, is a kind of last will and testament, intended to share the implications of her life-long and long-life research with a public audience, a commitment to expand the reach of her work. For Westerford, the forest provides, ideally, common ground, a space for creativity and experimentation and making. It is a space, in the words of feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti in *Posthuman Knowledge*, for "a collective affirmative praxis, that is to say a gesture of undoing negativity which honors our collective obligations to come" (65). We might also think of the forest as an undercommons for Westerford, a space for fugitive refuge and resistance.[20]

In her seventies, Westerford also struggles with moral questions that are at

---

[19] Rawlence tells us that in conservation classification there is a category of "true old growth," a subset of "old growth": "True old growth has soil structure and a complex understory (the layer of vegetation beneath the main canopy of a wood) that can only come from the accumulated deaths of generation after generation of tree" (25).

[20] I am borrowing Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's notion of the "undercommons" as a space of intellectual resistance and creativity in the Black radical tradition, with the site of the university singled out for critique.

once deeply existential and broadly planetary, encapsulated in her keynote speech for a conference on climate change entitled "Home Repair: Countering a Warming World." It is our last sight of her in the novel. Thinking from the point of view of trees, she asks herself and the audience this pressing question: "*What is the single best thing a person can do for tomorrow's world?"* (464). At the podium, armed with water and lethal plant extract, despairing of the role the human species is playing in the destruction of life on the planet, she contemplates suicide in front of her audience as the answer to the question.

The novel is not altogether clear as to how she answers that question (in an interview, Powers says definitively that she does not commit suicide).[21] But we do know that she has turned her knowledge into another form of action. In her seventies she launches a new project, creating a living archive of the seeds of trees from around the world, a resource that might ultimately serve as a key to the survival of multiple species of the plant world. Like a Douglas-fir, in her old age she has become a benefactor, providing sun, as it were, in the shape of seeds that will form new growth—trees.

The phrase "old growth" is associated with forests that are largely undisturbed from their beginnings. They are primeval if you will. The primary examples in *The Overstory* are the magnificent redwood forests of California and Oregon. Within capitalist culture, "old" and "growth" are antithetical terms. "Old" is associated with loss, stagnation, and decline, characteristics all too often associated with people who are perceived as chronologically old. By contrast, in the character of Westerford we find an inspiring figure of old growth, one who puts the lie to the contradiction of "old" and "growth," one who has learned so much from the gifts given by trees, one who lives with trees and advocates on their behalf. Although Westerford's husband has died and although she has no children, it would not be correct to say that she lives alone, as we typically would. She lives with trees. We can say the same of the other three characters who, at novel's end, are, by their own reckoning, old—Ray Brinkman, his wife Dorothy Cazaly, and Mimi Ma.

---

[21] On his intention regarding Westerfold's potential suicide, see Powers' interview with Michael Alec Rose: "For all the darkness that the book depicts, it does, indeed, end up remarkably hopeful. Patricia chooses life and strikes her blow against 'unsuicide.'"

2. New Kin and Feelings of Family

For me the most magical scene in *The Overstory* involves a married couple—Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly, now almost seventy—who have lived out their pedestrian years in St. Paul, Minnesota. Early in their marriage—on their first anniversary in fact—Ray determines to give the gift of a life to Dorothy, to offer her "a thing that grows," to plant a tree (117). Planting trees underscores the profound void they both acutely feel in remaining childless, a loss intensified when Ray, now much older, has a massive stroke that leaves him confined to his bed and virtually unable to speak. How will he sustain his life? What will be his legacy? Will there be new branches to the family tree?

The world of the backyard outside Ray's window becomes a lifeline, even a passion (looking through a window at the life outside is a trope often associated with elders[22]). Together Dorothy and Ray read books about trees, learning how to name them in the fullness of their attributes and histories. But one tree—the tree framed by the window—is a mystery. In time, following the work of naturalists and botanists, they come to realize it is, impossibly, a chestnut, "America's perfect, vanished tree," the tree that long ago disappeared from the United States, its forests destroyed by a deadly fungus (442). A chestnut tree, it is improbably far beyond what had been its natural habitat. A beautiful chestnut, it draws them together in the evening light "as the sun glints chartreuse off their chestnut's scalloped leaves," with Dorothy musing, "It's sometimes hard to say whether a tree is a single thing or whether it's a million" (443). It is both. We saw this also in the vision of the aspen grove.

What comes next is an illumination. Ray, thinking back through the years of nurturing seedlings in a paper cup before planting them outside, understands in an instant the bond that connects the three of them. In the six words he struggles to speak, he tells his wife a story: "*Planted it. The chestnut. Our daughter*" (444). It is a story of kinship across species.[23]

Much could be said at this point about the classical cultural tradition in the

---

[22] See, for example, Cecelia Condit's video *Annie Lloyd*, which I discuss in my essay "Assisted Living: Aging, Old Age, Memory, Aesthetics" with special attention to a crow in the sugar maple outside her mother's window in her room at the assisted living facility.

[23] Paul Saint-Amour interprets this scene differently, understanding that Ray and Dorothy have come to believe that the chestnut tree was planted by the daughter they are imagining they did have. "Their fictional child," he argues, "we could say, embodies their recognition that an impossible tree could only have been planted by an impossible child" (146).

West of transformation across beings, of humans struck into trees by gods, for example. I want instead to suggest two other ways of understanding this remarkable scene. First, *The Overstory* joins compelling cultural work that recognizes the urgent need to expand our ideas in the West of what constitutes a family and kin. In the gerontological literature on aging I have long been taken with the notion of fictive kin, the bonds people make with other people in the absence of family to solicit and offer care.[24] More provocatively, in *The Overstory* the concept of kin reverberates in a much larger orbit as well, one that transcends a single species, entangling trees and humans in mutually enhancing ways, with trees and humans providing care for each other. Sociologist Ruha Benjamin calls this meta kinship, the expansion of relatedness beyond the level of biological species. The work of the cultural theorist Donna Haraway, along with that of the cultural anthropologist Anna Tsing, is also salient here. As Haraway writes in *Making Kin Not Population,* "Kin must mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy, including population, family, and species. Kin making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans" (92).[25] In *The Overstory* trees are regarded by these main characters as persons. In this scene a tree is literally a daughter to a human couple, a tree-daughter nurtured to adulthood. In their old age their network of kin expands; they have raised family to sustain themselves. Together they are more than companion species, to draw on Donna Haraway's powerful work.[26] They are family. In the novel, this vision is not only metaphorical; it is also literalized, and that is its power. At the same time we can also understand the rhetoric of family being deployed in the novel as an act of strategic relationality, as the discursive creation of a meaningful bond, as we see, for example, in Simard's drawing on the rhetoric of the family in *Finding the Mother Tree*.

In the heightened cognizance of his understanding of their kinship across species, Ray has another crucial insight, one that prompts the two of them, in their seventies, to undertake an imaginative act of resistance, one that is local, situated in their yard.[27] They commit to doing—nothing. Flaunting municipal

[24] See Maryalice Jordan-Marsh and J. Taylor Harden on fictive kin and aging.

[25] I do not share the opinion that the concept of the individual is retrograde, vitiating any sense of reciprocity with others. Within the world of the novel, various trees are both portrayed as individuals—Mimas is exemplary in this regard—as well as part of the collective that is a forest.

[26] See Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Others.*

[27] I am simplifying here. Trained in the law, Ray also brings his legal knowledge to bear on the

regulations regarding how they should maintain their property, they refuse to interfere with the green world that has been emerging outside their walls. They continue to let life flourish, understanding that life is what grows.[28] And, in an enthralling sign of life, the forest, regenerating and rewilding, comes rushing back. I pause to note that with one exception, none of the main characters in *The Overstory* have (human) children. Instead, their vision is of growing forests. In *The Overstory,* old trees are our parents, as Thoreau wrote in 1855. They are also our descendants, our children.

Second, much as the character Patricia Westerford brings her scientific knowledge of the function of the root systems of trees to her sight of the sublime aspen grove, recent research amplifies and deepens our understanding of the biological tree of life, as it has long been called. As Westerford recounts in her last lecture to a public audience on the perils of a warming world, calling attention to what she understands as the common origin of humans and trees—and more broadly, the green world, "We're two things hatched from the same seed" (454). It is even more wonderfully complicated than that.

From Darwin we received the model of a branching tree to represent evolution. But recent research reveals what the gifted science writer David Quammen has marvelously called the tangled tree. One way of thinking differently about kin, Donna Haraway suggests, is in lateral terms. Thinking laterally is core to the story of life and evolutionary change that Quammen tells, key to which is horizontal gene transfer at the molecular level. The shape of the history of life is less like a tree, he tells us, and more like a network that is ecologically structured.[29] We know now that genes do not flow exclusively in one direction, vertically, from parents to offspring. Genes, we've learned, can be traded laterally across the boundaries of species, even between what are called the kingdoms of life (animals, plants, fungi, et al). My purpose here is not to explain this in any coherent detail. In truth, I could not. Rather, what

---

situation, providing an argument from self-defense. In *The Overstory* Powers references Christopher Stone's important essay "Should Trees Have Standing." My concern in this essay is not with legal rights but rather the interrelatedness of all things biological on a planetary level.

[28] I am referring here to a formulation of Luce Irigaray from *In the Beginning, She Was* (23), quoted in Michael Marder's *The Philosopher's Plant* as life is the thing that grows (213). In his essay "What Is Plant-Thinking?" Marder writes, "The human who thinks like a plant, literally becomes a plant" (134). See also Sumana Roy wonderfully fresh book, part essay, part autobiography, *How I Became a Tree.*

[29] See the section in David Quammen's *Tangled Tree* devoted to Eric Alm's work on horizontal gene transfer and the human microbiome, pp. 324-26.

is important is that the paradigm of genetic exchange differs vastly from that of a single branching tree proceeding in one direction only—vertically. In fact, the new model resonates with the discovery of the communication of trees via their root systems—horizontally. For me it thus offers another way of understanding Ray's vision of the chestnut tree, their daughter. Trees and humans are interrelated—more, they (we!) are biologically kin, beautifully entangled with each other. Evidence supports the conclusion, as Richard Powers encapsulates it, "that every organism alive today and those who have ever lived are members of a shared heritage that extends back to the origin of life some 3.8 billion years ago" (122). This is the principle of common ancestry.[30] Trees, "the lost kin of human," have been found (114).[31] All this gives new meaning to the idea of a family tree; it is composed of different species.

3. Enlightenment and Forest Time

The character of Westerford provides us with a model of advocacy and action in late life. So too do the characters of Ray and Dorothy, although unlike Westerford who works on the scale of the national and international, their scale is the hyper-local—their backyard. Mimi Ma offers us another way of living our life in tandem with trees in late age, one that she has pursued for years, attending to what trees have to tell her, a legacy from her Chinese father. The novel opens with the seventy-some-year-old Mimi Ma sheltering in a park in San Francisco, leaning against the trunk of a pine tree. This short scene is a page and a half and serves as a prologue to the novel. It is a parable, one with tenacious roots in the long Buddhist cultural tradition, prefiguring the attainment of enlightenment. Unlike the Buddha who was in his thirties when he experienced illumination meditating under a tree, Mimi Ma is old, at the end of her life, and in need of a sense of security and the absolution of understanding. What does she do? She seeks out a tree. Said the Buddha, as quoted in *The Overstory*, "A tree is a wonderous thing that shelters, feeds, and

---

[30] See T. Ryan Gregory's "Understanding Evolutionary Trees," which recognizes a paradigm shift in evolutionary biology toward tree thinking and provides an introduction to how to read the diagrams of evolutionary trees.

[31] The genetic interconnections between trees and humans could be said to be literalized in representations of bodies that meld the two life forms, expanding our notions of the biological specificity of a species. See the character of the elderly woman whose finger tips sprout foliage in the 2006 novel *Carpentaria* by the indigenous Australian Alexis Wright.

protects all living things" (222). Mimi Ma requires the solace offered by trees. She feels herself to be grievously alone. But she is also unequivocally accompanied—by trees.[32] In the evocative vocabulary of *The Overstory,* all around her trees are raining down messages, speaking to her, and to her the pine tree says: "Listen. There's something you need to hear" (4). It is the promise of a gospel. And listen she does.

The novel follows her from childhood through significant moments in her life as if the plot of her life were to learn from trees what she needs to know—and like the other main characters, she does.[33] At its end the long novel returns us to this scene. Having remained in the Bay area park all night, some five hundred pages from the beginning of the novel, she is still resting against the pine tree, a conduit of evolutionary knowledge and guidance, a refuge tree, perhaps, we might even say, a mother tree.[34] She has absorbed the speech of this tree, her ears having tuned down to the lowest frequencies, her mind having become "a greener thing" (499). It is a state of enlightenment, one in which, like Ray, she envisions the regeneration of the green world, one in which she ages into death assisted by this tree, growing calm and peaceful even as she shoulders a heavy burden of personal guilt, which she accepts.[35.] The last message Mima Ma receives is "*Be still and feel*" (500). She does. She is . . . testimony to old growth. To a beneficent form of assisted living in her old age. And assisted death.

In *The Overstory* trees have a protective relationship to humans. Reciprocally, all of the main characters have a passionate attachment to trees, increasing the radius of what I believe we should rightly call the social circles of humans,

---

[32] Sitting under a tree is an iconic image, one echoed by writer Helen Bevington in her book *The Third Way.* In her later years, knowing she will be living a solitary life and wishing for a sense of security in her independence, she finds her mind "full of trees" from her long life of learning, including the mulberry tree, which speaks to her of Confucian traditions (174). Like the fictional Mimi Ma, she seeks out a tree, albeit in an everyday life sort of way: she goes to the store to buy a ficus for her house, a tree to sit under.

[33] In *Alive, Alive Oh!*, the enchanting memoir published when she was ninety-seven, Diana Athill recounts how, as a young girl, in the company of a very old apple tree in the garden of her grandparents, she had "the beginning of the feeling that trees are as much living things as animals are, which I have to this day" (21-22).

[34] I call attention to the fact that the title of Suzanne Simard's book is *Finding the Mother Tree*, thus inscribing the rhetoric of kin and generations in her understanding of social life of trees.

[35] Resonating with the death of the fictional Ma, in August 2022 the eighty-plus year-old Tulsi Gawind Gowda, recipient of the Padma Shri award from the Indian government for her life-long work with trees, was quoted as saying, "The best death would be under the shade of a big tree with huge branches" (see Yasir).

expanding it to include trees.[36] The social psychologist Erik Erikson has hypothesized that the human life course can be understood as a series of normative interpenetrating psychological and social opportunities for growth, with the eighth stage, when one is near the end of one's life, understood as an animating tension between despair and integrity, with wisdom inhering in a "*detached concern with life itself, in the face of death itself*" (133-34).[37] Mimi Ma could be said to have a detached concern with her own life, yes, but she remains attached to trees as her social companions, her elders. This attachment is itself a mark of wisdom and of knowledge of the precarity of the green world which should, in ecological health, be the sustaining habitat of humans. Westerford, and Ray and Dorothy: they also remain attached to the life of trees, with Powers providing us a vision of these characters in their seventies alone—but not alone.

I am imagining that in writing this novel Powers hoped his readers would follow a path similar to that of Mimi Ma—and his other main characters as well, each in their different ways—bringing us to transformative knowledge about trees by being open to the agency of trees. To a feeling of belonging in the living sanctuary provided by the post-human green world, one in which "giving trees" exist (221). Even as time has grown shorter for Mimi Ma in terms of mortality, time has also expanded in the embrace of trees, figured here as *their embrace of humans*, imparting their knowledge to us, sending us messages that we not so much decode as implicitly understand, that we breathe in, affectively, messages that offer consolation and a sense of aesthetic wonder.[38]

The first of the messages she hears—they are all wise—is this: *"A good answer is worth reinventing from scratch, again and again"* (500). It is an echo of what we read earlier in the novel: "It's a great idea, trees. So great that evolution keeps inventing it, again and again" (114). The same cannot be said for *Homo*

---

[36] We should remember that trees are themselves social beings. As Rawlence puts it, "There is something profoundly wrong with a solitary pine," noting that solitary Scottish pines are susceptible to sudden death before they reach their normal life expectancy. Are they perhaps lonely in their old age, he speculatively asks (17). Stirred by a form of sympathy, he writes of a 540-year-old giant granny pine who has long provided a habitat for others but has no surviving descendants of her own (see pp. 16-17).

[37] See my first book on aging, *At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing: The Late Poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams*, in which I develop the notion—it is Eriksonian—of what today I might call the practice of "aesthetic integrity" in old age that allows one to surmount despair.

[38] See Linda Hess's beautiful essay on the aesthetic networks of *The Overstory.*

sapiens, whose wanton destruction of the biosphere has caused so much death and increasingly threatens—vertiginously so—much of life on earth. Evolution has not seen fit to invent humans again and again. As the trees say elsewhere in the novel, "Long answers need long time. And long time is exactly what's vanishing" (356).

"Long time" is ambiguous, perhaps especially so in our age of the Anthropocene (although much of the novel is set in the late twentieth century before the term "Anthropocene" was invented in 2000, its themes call up the threat of climate change). I turn here to the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty who has written in altogether illuminating ways about the imbrication of history and climate change. He distinguishes three different timescales—1) geological time, 2) the time of the emergence and evolution of life on the planet, and 3) the time of world history or human history. In my essay engaging aging in the Anthropocene I suggested that to these three we add a fourth, the smallest measure: the human life span, a figure that at its outer limit is 125 years. For humans, geological time is the most abstract; as a measure of temporality, it is not featured in *The Overstory*. Instead, within the world of *The Overstory*, long time is associated with Chakrabarty's second timescale, the emergence and evolution of life on the planet over the long stretch of four billion years (345). This is a passage of time virtually impossible for humans to comprehend, limited as we are by our own sense of embodied time, our life span. A major impediment to addressing the threat to humans and other-than humans in the biosphere is the often cited inability of humans to grasp the scales of time involved. It is commonly thought that as humans we are unable to stretch our imagination sufficiently far into the future—beyond, for instance, several human generations or our own life span—to comprehend the import of climate change.

In *The Overstory* trees, our elders, are our tutors, schooling us in acquiring the capacity to imagine time beyond our life span or three generations, fostering long-term thinking. Their longevity provides us with units of measurement beyond our own scale, helping us to develop what Zach Horton has called scale literacy in relation to temporality and climate change. One of the significant accomplishments of the novel is to offer the timescale of the life and death of trees to *mediate* the timescales of geological long time, the emergence of life on the planet, the time of human history, and the life span of *Homo sapiens*, bringing us closer to understanding palpably the tragedy of

the loss of life in the age of the Anthropocene and the loss to come. As opposed to geological time, which is as vast as it is abstract, the temporality of *forest time*, embodied in the varying life spans of individual trees, allows us to grasp the consequences of climate change which, within the world of the novel, names capitalism as the agent of the destruction of trees, "the most wonderous products of four billion years of creation" (345).[39] In fact, given my focus on the comparative age spans of trees and humans, it might be better to understand these timescales as *agescales*.

Consider, for example, the death before its time of the chestnut so critical to one of the major characters, the artist Nicholas Hoel (the tree's life is claimed by the fungus that felled chestnuts by the hundreds of thousands in the eastern US). At the beginning of *The Overstory*, Powers recounts the story of Nick's midwestern family connected through six generations by their care of a single tree—a chestnut. The life of this tree provides continuity across generations that in and of itself is meaningful; it also offers a way of grasping time beyond two or three human generations, stretching time. If we think of a particular species of tree as our parents, how old is the upper limit of the generation of our tree-parents? Hundreds of years? Thousands? Our tree-grandparents? And generations beyond them? Being aged by and with trees, growing old with trees, slows down time even as, for humans, it is foreshortened in bodily terms. Paradoxically, focusing on trees allows a new sense of longevity to be created, that of the linkage of past generations, of belonging to a world that is older and is still vital.

Moreover, time, from the point of view of trees, is concentric, not punishingly linear. Their time can be read by humans in the ever-expanding circles on the trunks of trees, circles that contain past, present, and a promise of a future that is underground as well as above it. For Mimi Ma, for instance, as Powers beautifully puts it, "Time was not a line unrolling in front of her. It was a column of concentric circles with herself at the core and the present floating outward along the outermost rim" (35). Time dilates, offering humans in relation to trees the possibility of imagining time in scales beyond the life span of the human species and beyond a limited consciousness of generational

[39] See Birgit Spengler's essay in which, drawing on the Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope, she pursues a similar reading, suggesting that in *The Overstory* geological time, which for her (unlike myself) includes tree time, is contrasted with human time, enabling "readers to reimagine time and space from a less anthropocentric perspective" (78).

connections.[40] Toward the end of *The Overstory* Nick visits the empty family farm, which has been sold to a developer. What he discovers is not the sentinel height of the Hoel chestnut tree but its stump. He also finds scores of fresh green shoots springing up from the base of what was once the family tree. They will be, he knows, ravaged by so-called development. But the capacity of life is there—still. At the end of *The Overstory* Powers asks us to marvel with him at the deep and mysterious achievement of a great age—of a forest, of an individual tree—and to imagine life to come, springing out of decay and connections with other trees, underground, spiraling back, concentric.

*

I opened this essay on the entanglements of aging across species with a potential focus on the life span and life expectancy. We need multi-species ethnographies of aging for the intrinsic reasons of understanding to the best of our knowledge the experience of other-than-humans and in order to live as fruitfully we can in ecological balance with other species, an imperative in the age of the Anthropocene.[41] Trees provide us a starting point. I am acutely aware, however, that I have been speaking primarily from the point of view of human needs. If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? This question too has long been posed from the point of view of humans. Nonetheless, today we can say, with the suggestive assurance of recent science, that other trees would be aware of its falling.

Extending a healthy life expectancy—for both human and trees—is, I would argue, an intrinsic good, valuable in and of itself. Human life expectancy has doubled over the last century, a remarkable achievement (it is

---

[40] In the West we need models of generational connection that extend beyond, for instance, the dominant psychoanalytic model of struggle between adjacent generations; see my essay "Inventing Generational Consciousness: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Literature." Consider Linda Hogan's beautiful novel *Solar Storms* (1995), a story of five generations of Native women, with the great-great-grandmother understood as "a root" which together with subsequent generations is "like a family tree, aspen or birch, connected to one another underground, the older trees feeding the young, sending off shoots, growing" (48).

[41] For example, what shape would studies of dogs as they age, take? Research at the University of Washington provides a model. See "The Dog Aging Project," sited at the Healthy Aging and Longevity Research Institute, https://halo.dlmp.uw.edu/uwhalo/basic-biology-of-aging/research/the-dog-aging-project/ Another model of research dedicated to the aging of non-human animals—it is from the world of photography--is Isa Leshko's *Allowed to Grow Old: Portraits of Elderly Animals from Farm Sanctuaries.*

also an achievement that has been recently disrupted by increasing health disparities and the disastrous fallout from Covid-19). But trees? To my knowledge there are no aggregate, global measures of life expectancy for different species of trees. But we do know without a shadow of a doubt that for trees, life expectancy has plunged, with the enormous and ongoing destruction of forests only one measure of the loss. Inarguably, such devastating loss of life is at the hands of humans, even as there are those who are working to extend the human life span, a delusional quest that would further disrupt the precarious balance of the web of life on the planet. That quest accelerated in the United States in the early years of the twenty-first century, with both academic and corporate research in longevity genes hailed by many as fundamental to increasing the human life span.[42] That this was occurring at the same time as tropical forests were being decimated is benighted at all levels. While *The Overstory* does not explicitly address the question of extending the human life span, it does implicitly caution against it. In *The Overstory* comprehending forest time gives rise to understanding—and acceptance of—human time, which is to say, the upper biological limit of the life span of our species. One of the lessons of *The Overstory* is that we must allow the collective evolution of species—evolution is a major theme in the novel—to do its work over long time, over evolutionary time as it is evoked in the novel, that is, forest time, not human time. Not only is evolutionary development presented as occurring over long time spans in *The Overstory,* it is also implicitly presented as mutual development—between organisms and their environments as a process of symbiopoiesis.[43] With regard to human aging, mutual evolutionary development is not a process that can take place in isolation in a laboratory.

As we read in *The Overstory*, in words attributed to trees, and as I've mentioned before, "Long answers need long time. And long time is exactly what's vanishing" (356). Not only do trees have longer life spans than do humans, in evolutionary time they existed for eons before *Homo sapiens*. *The Overstory* asks us to consider the longevity of species as species, with the scale

[42] See Ted Anton, *The Longevity Seekers.*

[43] See Gilbert Scott et al, "Symbiosis as a Source of Selectable Epigenetic Variation." See also Jared Farmer's *Elderflora* in which he notes that the endurance of individual trees belonging to five species with exceedingly long life spans (cedar, olive, ginko, pipal, and baobab) "is symbiotic—a combined function of evolutionary potential and human assistance" (31).

of the species of trees a unit of measurement of the potential longevity of *Homo sapiens*. "And long time is exactly what is vanishing." Here the lens of comparative longevity in relation to *Homo sapiens* is more-than-sobering, with time foreshortened and the extinction of humans in a relatively short time more than a possibility. . . .

This is another way of understanding that old trees are our parents. As Diana Beresford-Kroeger puts it in terms of foundational building blocks of life, trees create the atmosphere of oxygen crucial to the survival of humans. "Trees don't simply maintain the conditions necessary for human and most animal life on Earth; trees created those conditions through the community of forests," she writes in *To Speak for the Trees* (102). "The photosynthetic reaction is the reverse of ordinary breathing," she reminds us. "This means that plants and humans are connected by chemistry, by oxygen and carbon dioxide. These two molecules conduct both life and death" (111). Understanding our interdependence is crucial.

"Old trees are our parents," wrote Thoreau. Let us be clear. We are killing our parents. It is a monstrous act. It is parricide and matricide. And it is a form of suicide. It is particularly egregious to cut down trees which have attained a venerable age, to decimate old growth. I would say it is a sacrilege.

*

Finally, I want to add a word about the literary imagination and ways of affiliating with the green world. I mentioned earlier that for their first anniversary, Ray finds himself confounded about what gift to Dorothy would rise to the level of what she has given him. The best, he decides, is to give her "a thing that grows" (17). He chooses a tree. As we are reminded in the novel, the word "book" comes from the word "beech." A novel is also a thing that grows. From an idea, an image, an object, a seed. *The Overstory* gives life to ideas that have taken root, branching in multiple directions, above ground and underground, connecting with other books. Thanks to *The Overstory,* I have read a myriad other books and articles about trees. My intellectual life has expanded in ways I hadn't imagined. I have branched out. I find myself in welcome and warm admiration of people I do not know who have given us the gift of their research and experience across their lives in forests, several of them over long lives, including Suzanne Simard (sixty-two), Diana Beresford-Kroeger (seventy-seven), German forester Peter Wohlleben (fifty-eight), and Margaret Lowman (sixty-nine), well known for her research on tree canopies.

I am grateful that they wrote for a public audience. Thanks to their work and to that of many, many others, with regard to trees and to forests, the environment and aging, the potential impact of *The Overstory* has been enhanced by having appeared at a moment when so many in the cultural sphere have been contributing to a revelatory conversation about trees and forests, including the photographer Beth Moon.[44] Today we find ourselves at an inflection point where this knowledge is being diffused rapidly, engendering compelling conversations, fresh insights, and new states of mind and practices.

With regard to the green world, both Suzanne Simard and Potawatomi plant ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer (sixty-nine), author of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants,* offer down-to-earth advice. Start a garden, they both urge. Put a plant on your windowsill. Attach yourself to a tree as a companion, imagining yourself a part of the social life of the tree you have chosen, as do the characters in *The Overstory*. And as has Richard Powers himself. He tells us that as a direct result of writing *The Overstory*, he moved from Silicon Valley in California to Appalachia to live in the smoky Mountains and there found his way of being in the world changed immeasurably, his life now in rhythm with forest time.[45]

I am reminded that in 1977 when I was at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, I taught an introductory interdisciplinary seminar in the humanities on aging in which I included the seventeen-minute film *The Stringbean,* a silent story of an old woman in France who, poor and living alone in a small walk-up apartment, nurtured the seed of a stringbean to growth in a pot on a windowsill. I vividly remember her watering the plant. I remember the plant growing. I also remember the film being in black and white. What I hadn't remembered is that she transplants the stringbean in the beautiful formal garden that is the Tuileries in Paris and that the cycle begins again when she plants new seeds from the stringbean in the empty pot. Perhaps the idea of that happy ending struck me as fanciful, a hopeful note unnecessarily underscored by the gardens having been rendered in the film in color. In truth, I confess I was more engaged then with the solitary life of the old

[44] See *Ancient Trees: Portraits of Time*, a collection of photographs by Beth Moon of very old trees from around the world. Much of her attention is devoted to trees that take on gnarled shapes over time, including the bristlecone pine, the baobab, and the strangler fig.
[45] See the conversation between Richard Powers and Ezra Klein.

woman than with the life of the plant which for me then served as a metaphor for the stages of development of a human life, not as a focus of attention in its own right. Today what strikes me as so important is precisely her affiliation with this green form of life under her tender care—and their mutual entanglement. For she was powerfully sustained by raising this plant. This is also a dimension of old growth—of elders taking care of the young, enlivened by feeling of family.

As for my own state of mind and my everyday life at seventy-eight, the green world has been for the last four years much more a part of my life than before (for the past twenty years I have lived in Seattle, Washington, which is known as the Evergreen State). Much. I literally credit this to *The Overstory*. During the pandemic I walked daily in nearby federal protected wetlands to the point where it seemed I knew the terrain intimately, if not every tree or even every stand of trees (to this day, however, I haven't chosen a tree and I don't expect I will). I have remained attached to these walks and wooded spaces—to the Lombardy poplars, English hawthorns, and Sitka spruce. But I want to introduce myself to others too. I guess you could say that I want to travel. It would also be fair to say that books remain my first and steadfast companions. And for me, reading *The Overstory* is like taking a long walk in the woods or, even, perhaps, like living in the forest.

Acknowledgements

I give enormous thanks to both Stephen Katz for his invitation to present an early version of this essay at the Conference on the Posthumanist Turn in Ageing Studies, Trent Centre for Ageing and Society/Concordia University Centre for Research on Ageing, November 15, 2022, and Funda Civelekoglu for her invitation to deliver a keynote address at the Conference on Ageing, Survival, and Longevity, Ege University, Izmir, Turkey, May 25-27, 2022. I am also exceedingly grateful to two deeply knowledgeable and astute anonymous readers for their suggestions.

Works Cited

Adams, Rachel. "The Art of Interspecies Care." *New Literary History*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2020, pp. 695-716.

Andrews, Gavin. "All-World Aging: A Gero of All Things under the Material Press in Time." *Canadian Geographer*, September 27, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12718

Andrews, Gavin and Cameron Duf. "Understanding the Vital Emergence and Expression of Aging: How Matter Comes to Matter in Gerontology's Posthumanist Turn." *Journal of*

Aging Studies, vol. 49, 2019, pp. 46-55.

Anton, Ted. *The Longevity Seekers: Science, Business, and the Fountain of Youth.* U of Chicago P, 2013.

Athill, Diana. *Alive, Alive Oh! And Other Things That Matter.* Norton, 2015.

Benjamin, Ruha, "Black AfterLives Matter: Cultivating Kindness as Reproductive Justice." *Making Kin Not Population*, edited by Adele E. Clarke and Donna Haraway, Prickly Paradigm P, 2018, pp. 41-65.

Beresford-Kroeger, Diana. *To Speak for the Trees: My Life's Journey from Ancient Celtic Wisdom to a Healing Vision of the Forest.* Timber P, 2019.

Bevington, Helen. *The Third Way: Reflections on Staying Alive.* Duke UP, 1996.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Posthuman Knowledge*. Polity P, 2019.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Human Condition in the Anthropocene." The Tanner Lectures, 2015. https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/c/Chakrabarty%20manuscript.pdf

Concilio, Carmen and Daniela Fargione, editors. *Trees in Literature and the Arts: Human Arboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene.* Lexington Books, 2021.

DeFalco, Amelia. "Posthuman Care and Posthumous Life in *Marjorie Prime*." *Critical Humanities and Ageing: Forging Interdisciplinary Dialogues,* edited by Marlene Goldman, Kate de Medeiros, and Thomas Cole, Routledge, 2022, pp. 283-292.

Dong, Xiao, Brandon Milholland, and Jan Vij. "Evidence for a Limit to Human Lifespan." *Nature* 538, 2016, pp. 257-59.

Doolittle, W. Ford. "Uprooting the Tree of Life." *Scientific American*, vol. 282, no. 2, 2000, pp. 90-95.

Erikson, Erik. *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight.* Norton, 1964.

Fargione, Daniela. "Tree Photography, Arboreal Timescapes, and the Archive in Richard Powers' *The Overstory.*" *Trees in Literature and the Arts: Human Arboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene*, edited by Carmen Concilio and Daniela Fargione, Lexington Books, pp. 245-61.

Farmer, Jared. *Elderflora: A Modern History of Ancient Trees*. Basic Books, 2022.

Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Aged by Culture.* U of Chicago P, 2004.

Haraway, Donna. "Making Kin in the Chthulucene: Reproducing Multispecies Justice." *Making Kin Not Population*, edited by Adele E. Clarke and Donna Haraway, Prickly Paradigm P, 2018, pp. 67-99.

—. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness.* Prickly Paradigm P, 2003.

—. *When Species Meet.* U of Minnesota P, 2007.

Harley, Alexis. *Autobiologies: Charles Darwin and the Natural History of the Self.* Bucknell UP, 2015.

Hess, Linda M. "The Aesthetics of Wonder: Networks of the Grievable in Richard Powers' *The Overstory." REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature,* issue 35, December 2019, pp. 189-206.

Horton, Zach. "The Trans-Scalar Challenge of Ecology." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment,* vol.26, no. 1 (2019), pp. 1-22.

Jordan-Marsh, Maryalice and J. Taylor Harden. "Fictive Kin: Friends as Family Supporting Older Adults as They Age." *Journal of Gerontological Nursing*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2005, pp. 24-31.

Katz, Stephen. "*Population:* Is It Time to Revisit This Term in Aging Research?" *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 6, 2022, pp. 1-5. https://doi.org/10.7146/ageculturehumanities.v6i.133332

Lee, Lewina O. et al, *PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States)*, vol. 116, no. 37, September 10, 2019, https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/116/37/18357.full.pdf Accessed May 1, 2022.

Leshko, Isa. *Allowed to Grow Old: Portraits of Elderly Animals from Farm Sanctuaries.* U of Chicago P, 2019.

Lowman, Meg. *The Arbornaut: A Life Discovering the Eighth Continent in the Trees above Us.* Picador, 2021.

Marder, Michael. *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium.* Columbia UP, 2014.

—. "What Is Plant-Thinking?" *Klesis: Revue Philosophique,* 2013, pp. 124-43.

Masiero, Pia. "'The tree is saying things in words before words': Form as Theme in Richard Powers' *The Overstory." DEP: Deportate, esuli, profughe* 41, 42, 2020, pp. 135-50.

Moon, Beth. *Ancient Trees, Portraits of Time.* Abeville P, 2014.

Moten, Fred and Stephano Harney. "The University and the Undercommons." *SocialText*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, pp. 101-15.

Nadkarni, Nalini M. *Between Earth and Sky: Our Intimate Connections to* Trees. U of California P, 2008.

Nitzke, Solvejg and Helga G. Braunbeck, editors. *Arboreal Imaginaries: An Introduction to the Shared Cultures of Trees and Humans. Green Letters*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2022, pp. 341-55.

Powers, Richard. "Interview by Michael Alec Rose." *Book Page*, April 2018 https://www.bookpage.com/interviews/22518-richard-powers-fiction/

—. Interview by Dan Kois. "The Death of Mimas." *Slate*, June 20, 2022. https://slate.com/culture/2022/07/overstory-book-mimas-death-scene-richard-powers-interview.html

—. *The Overstory.* Norton, 2018.

—. "Richard Powers on What We Can Learn from Trees," Transcript of a conversation with Ezra Klein. *New York Times,* September 28, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/28/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-richard-powers.html

Quammen, David. *The Tangled Tree: A Radical New History of Life.* Simon and Schuster, 2018.

Rawlence, Ben. *The Treeline: The Last Forest and the Future of Life on Earth.* St. Martin's P, 2022.

Rose, Deborah Bird. "Introduction: Writing in the Anthropocene." *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 49, 2009.

Ross, Alex. "The Past and the Future of the Earth's Oldest Trees." *The New Yorker,* January 20, 2020. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/20/the-past-and-the-future-of-the-earths-oldest-trees

Roy, Sumana. *How I Became a Tree.* Aleph Book Company, 2017.

Saint-Amour, Paul K. "There Is Grief of a Tree." *American Imago*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2020, pp. 137-55.

Schwab, Gabriele. "Trees, Fungi, and Humans: A Transspecies Story." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 21, no.3, 2021, pp. 245-67.

Scott, Gilbert et al. "Symbiosis as a Source of Selectable Epigenetic Variation." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B.* 365, 2010, pp. 671-78.

Séchan, Edouard, dir. *The Stringbean (Le haricot).* Janus Films, 1962. 17 min. https://archive.org/details/thestringbean_201507

Simard, Suzanne. *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*. Knopf, 2021.

Spengler, Birgit. "Arboreal Encounters in Richard Powers's *The Overstory.*" *An Eclectic Bestiary: Encounters in a More-Than-Human World*, edited by Birgit Spengler and Babette B. Tischleder, Transcript Publishing, 2020, pp. 65-89.

Stone, Christopher D. *Should Trees Have Standing: Law, Morality, and the Environment.* Oxford UP, 2010.

Thoreau, Henry David. October 23, 1855. Journal entry. https://blogthoreau.blogspot.com/2007/10/thoreaus-journal-23-oct-1855.html

Tsing, Anna. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalistic Ruins.* Princeton UP, 2015.

Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia.* Harvard UP, 1984.

Wohlleben, Peter. *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World.* Greystone Books, 2016.

Woodward, Kathleen. "Afterword: Literary Antidotes to the Toxin That Is Ageism." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2019, pp, 373-81.

—. "Ageing in the Anthropocene: The View From and Beyond Margaret Drabble's *The Dark Flood Rises.*" *Literature and Ageing*, edited by Elizabeth Barry with Margery Vibe Skagen, D.S. Brewer, 2020, pp. 37-63.

—. "Assisted Living: Aging, Old Age, Memory, Aesthetics." *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities,* April 2012. https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/assisted-living-aging-old-age-memory-aesthetics

—. *At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing: The Late Poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams.* Ohio State UP, 1980.

—. "Feeling Frail and National Statistical Panic: Joan Didion in *Blue Nights* and the

American Economy at Risk." *Age, Culture, Humanities*, vol. 2, 2015. https://doi.org/10.7146/ageculturehumanities.v2i.130617

—. "Inventing Generational Models: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Literature," *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations,* edited by Kathleen Woodward, Indiana UP, 1999, pp. 149-68.

Yasir, Sameer. "'Magic in Her Hands.' The Woman Bringing India's Forests Back to Life." *New York Times*, September 2, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/02/world/asia/deforestation-india-tulsi-gowda.html?searchResultPosition=1

Kathleen Woodward, Director of the Simpson Center for the Humanities, is Lockwood Professor in the Humanities and Professor of English at the University of Washington. She is the author of *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of Emotions* (2009), *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (1991), and *At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing: The Late Poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams* (1980). She is also the editor of *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (1999) as well as the coeditor of *Memory and Desire: Aging--Literature--Psychoanalysis* (1986), and *Aging and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology* (1978).