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"Ecriture Féminine" and Ecoethics in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*

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Abstract

This paper explores the entanglement between the ecological issues and the feminist questions in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018). The predominant focus of the novel is unquestionably ecology and the criticism of anthropocentrism; however, the systematic presence of the feminist ethos creates an adjacent field of inquiry worthy of consideration. Indeed, the issue of gender discrimination in the academy, female empowerment, and the foregrounding of ecofeminism and feminist care ethics collaborate to constitute a nested web of feminist concerns, spelling the script of "écriture féminine." The female characters feature as the discursive tools for several revisions, which is synchronous with the narrative's revision of the concept of the masculinist anthropocene as a damaging view of the world. Instead, the feminist undertones of the narrative reinforce the view of nature as a nonhuman 'other,' deserving full entitlement to moral consideration rather than simply being backstage for Man's actions in the world.

Keywords: American literature, ethics, anthropocene, ecofeminism, écriture féminine, Richard Powers

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Öz

Bu makale, Richard Powers’ın *The Overstory* (2018) eserindeki çevresel konular ve feminist kaygılar arasındaki bağlantıları inceler. Romanın odak noktası, şüphesiz, ekoloji ve insan merkezcilik eleştirisidir, ancak feminist değer sisteminin varlığı da dikkate değer bir inceleme alanı sunar. Gerçekten de, akademideki cinsiyet ayrımcılığı, kadının güçlenmesi meselesi, ekofeminizm ve feminist etik, feminist kaygıların iç içe geçtiği bir ağ (écriture féminine) oluşturur. Romanın kadın karakterleri değişim için söylemsel araçlar olarak işlev görürler. Bu da, anlatının, maskülen insan merkezci anlayışı dünyaya zarar verici bir görüş olarak revize etmesiyle eşzamanlıdır. Anlatının feminist alt tonları, doğanın, sadece insan eylemleri için bir arka plan oluşturmadığını, aksine, dikkati hak eden insan dışı bir “öteki” olduğu görüşünü pekiştirir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerikan edebiyatı, etik, antroposen, ekofeminizm, écriture féminine, Richard Powers

> Deep within ourselves we know that our omnipotence is a sham, our knowledge and control of the future is weak and limited, our inventions and discoveries work . . . in ways we do not expect, our planning is meaningless, our systems are running amok—in short, that the humanistic assumptions upon which our societies are grounded lack validity
>
> —David Ehrenfeld, qtd. in Fromm 441.

Introduction

This paper seeks to study the feminist ethos in Richard Powers' eco-narrative *The Overstory* (2018), aiming to unveil the book's new propositions about human-nonhuman relationships. The accent lies on the centrality of empathy and care for a novel approach to nature. *The Overstory* features a large cast of characters who meet after strange coincidences, and their intentions and spatial movements are geared toward saving nature. Ecological activism ties the lives of these characters with trees, drawing its energy from the female actants. The action mostly unfolds in the American woods, which become the stage for female heroism. The novel counters the destructive potential of human activities through the rediscovery of the natural elements as non-human 'others,' primarily enlightened by the leading female characters.

Gender in the text does not feature as an a priori category besides ecology; rather, it is smoothly generated in the background in a way as to never override ecological concerns. The feminist dynamics do not qualify as an overarching theme, yet they collaborate to constitute a vein that is discernable. The shift of focus is encoded in the empowered female characters in *The Overstory*, and in the suggestion that they are inextricable from the natural environment. Notably, the non-realist moments in the narrative further project female characters as a category that is more kin with nature than with humans, regarding the improbabilities governing their fates and actions, all wired towards the ecological cause. In *The Overstory*, Patricia Westerford is already

depicted as a weird child even before the unnatural episode where nature sends signals through her body to prevent her from committing suicide. Olivia Vandergriff, a 'lost' soul, has visions and hears the voices of supernatural entities and spirits that are sent by nature to change the course of her life towards ecological activism.

The coupling of the unnatural with female voices and incentives fulfills two dimensions. First, there seems to be a clear engagement with the anthropocentric view of nature, criticizing its masculinist conception. Second, the weird occurrences address a traditional tendency in eco-narratives to rely on realism, as "much nature writing in the American and European traditions takes a more or less mimetic approach to the question of representation, often basing itself on the acts of looking at or walking through natural landscapes" (Heise 130). The implausible attributes and events, then, provide an alternative template for writing about ecology and engaging with the perceived threat to nature. Reflecting on this turn, Natalie Dederichs coined the term "Atmosfears" to qualify the "deeply unsettling imaginaries" (27) that inhabit weird eco-fiction texts. The estrangement in fiction, she argues, bridges the gap between human and non-human entities, "reaffirming ecological relationality and thus undoing this human self-estrangement" (38).

Undoubtedly, the earth is suffering, and "the increasing frequency of seismic trembles, hurricanes, freak temperatures, and toxic spills" (Ingwersen 74) echo Man's exploitation of the natural environment without regard to what would happen next. Damaging the environment threatens future generations and makes the prospect of a "sixth extinction" seem possible. Speaking of "the sixth great extinction" as an almost inevitable fact, Claire Colebrook states that "climate becomes an indispensable concept for thinking about the new modes of knowledge and feeling that mark the twenty-first century in terms of our growing sense of precarious attachment to a fragile planet" (11). This article proposes that these "new modes of knowledge" are advanced from a feminist point of view in *The Overstory*, illustrating the ongoing revision of anthropocentrism.

Drawing from the insights of posthumanism and feminist theories, the paper seeks to identify the feminist framing of the ecological question, advancing the idea that ecofeminism presents an approach to ecological salvation based on care ethics because they are divorced from the alleged masculinist self-centeredness and utilitarian thought.

The feminist framework mainly operates through the alliance between several narrative elements that collaborate to create the vein of Hélène Cixous' notion of "écriture féminine." First, the course of the revisionist thought that has gradually led to the reconsideration of Man's place in the universe will be reviewed, culminating in the feminist critique of anthropocentrism. The next section explores gender discrimination in relation to academia and how its staging and phrasing conform to "écriture féminine." Then, the ways feminism is enmeshed with a tale of nature as a nonhuman 'other' are further analyzed, to draw the contours of ecofeminist ethics. Ultimately, however, it is noted that Powers seems to discuss the limitations of the single view, particularly in *The Overstory*'s ambivalent ending which throws clear demarcations into doubt, calling for collaborative efforts rather than exclusionary thought.

Ecofeminism: The Roots

Broadly, the studies engaging with the status of Man as embedded in a larger environmental context beyond the premise of his uniqueness or supremacy in the "great chain of beings," mark the turn of the new millennium, and bear witness to an altered vision articulated along different theoretical axes. It is probably wise to trace the seeds of this shift back to the late 1940s with the advent of the theories that initiated the assault on supremacist views, exclusionary thought, and discriminatory practices. The teaming of these theories has come to be known as postmodern thought, embracing the rejection of the ossified assumptions that have primarily secured an illusory bounded Western subjectivity, which is accepted to be at the origin of the hierarchies of worth and justice that have shaped the existence of human beings. With a positively aggressive vigor, feminist voices seized the signifying backlash to remove male biases from language, social practices, and political and economic activities, social practices, and political and economic exercises from male biases. Indeed, the feminists' world is "a just world . . . where equality and freedom are premises, not aspirations" (Arruzza et al. 3). Although feminism as a consistent movement can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, rebellious thought regarding discrimination against women certainly predates the movement. Sarah Gamble locates the first seeds of feminist resistance as far back as the seventeenth century, explaining that the period between 1550 and 1700 was an era of "legitimate" oppression and abuse of women: no systematic right to education, to any sort of involvement in political life,

nor economic independence, together with the accepted fact that a girl was the property of her father until her marriage (4). In short, women were an inferior branch of humans, tainted by Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden with fewer capabilities than men for moral behavior and rational thought. Contesting patriarchal rule operated through campaigns for education and the benefits of cultivating rational thought for women, deemed hysterical and affect-driven for so long.

Apart from a revision and, at times, a rejection of previous feminist assumptions, the new vein or Third Wave Feminism—also alternatively labeled Postfeminism (36)—crosses the boundary of gender and allows intersection with ethnicity, race, disability, queer, and ecology, excavating the different forms Man –dominated by masculine views- continues to operate in hegemonic ways. Prominent voices from the "margin" developed a distinctive area of investigation centering on race (Michelle Wallace, Angela Davis, and Bell Hooks), ethnicity (Gayatri Spivak), transgender issues (Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler), or class. These theoreticians discuss how the different categories "come together to create a system of privilege or disadvantage for any individual" (Galvan 332).

As the logical end of the feminist processing of reality, attacking capitalism seemed the obvious move to yield genuine change. Capitalism is "the system that generates the boss, produces national borders, and manufactures the drones that guard them" (Arruzza et al. 3). It is clear from the above quotation that the terrain of feminist investigation and theorization extends to issues of social justice, immigration, and refugees. More to the interest of the present study, and with direct relation to capitalism, ecology has come to occupy a prominent theoretical space as early as the 1970s with *The Lady of the Land* (1975) by Annette Kolodny, and *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (1991) by Janet Biehl, inaugurating a new line of thought that tries to "de-anthropomorphize self-regarding humanity by focusing on an identifiable "Other"" (Fromm 441). Feminists from the 1980s have already theorized "humans, nonhumans, culture, and nature as inextricably entangled" (Grusin viii), demarcating themselves from an anthropocentric view of the universe, largely assessed as masculinist.

According to Bruno Latour, the anthropocene refers to "the Male Western Subject [who] dominated the wild and savage world nature through his courageous, violent, sometimes hubristic dream of control" (5). It is undeniable that the capitalist and liberal policies that

have governed the world since the Industrial Revolution are largely devised and led by male protagonists. The disastrous consequences on the environment point to the failure of the masculinist approach in creating the conditions for a smooth coexistence between the different living entities on Earth. Ecofeminism has particularly been insightful in identifying the "structural homologies between patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and technoscience, each of which depends on enforcing hierarchical dualisms between dominant and oppressed entities" (Grusin ix). Thus, the anthropocentric approach to the world has yielded a structure that marks as Adams and Gruen state, "those with power and those available to be exploited by those with power" (3).

As a conceptual and analytical field that roughly emerged in the 1970s, ecofeminism draws from multiple feminist discourses and perspectives to reflect on the devastation of the environment by human action. The main contention according to Ynestra King is that "there is no hierarchy in nature: among persons, between persons and the rest of the natural world, or among the many forms of nonhuman nature" (qtd. in Adams and Gruen, "Footings" 1). Ecofeminism sets the link between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature, which naturally makes both issues intersect. In fact, "[a]nalyzing mutually reinforcing logics of domination and drawing connections between practical implications of power relations has been a core project of ecofeminism" (1). One of the substantial claims of ecofeminism is that Man should be repositioned as one element alongside the other nonhuman elements in the universe, and his whims, aspirations, and well-being must not be advanced at the expense of the entities that cannot protest or protect themselves. Special endeavors go as far as proposing an "anthropocene feminism" (Grusin x) to signal the break with prior conceptions of the anthropocene, suggesting that a seriously damaged ecology is the product of centuries of male-anthropocene domination. In *The Overstory*, the reader is invited to contemplate the ecological concern, and a close reading of the text shows the unmistakable feminist tone.

Gender in the Academia and the Poetics of "Ecriture Féminine"

Reading *The Overstory*, one is overwhelmed by the thematic, semantic, and lexical presence of the trees. The novel is about a group of American people from different locations and backgrounds, whose

paths ultimately cross in the battle to save the American legendary trees from being destroyed. Becoming activists, they roam the American landscape, and narration becomes a vast canvas of descriptive passages about the splendid trees, naming every breed and every microorganism in the entire ecosystem. Following a magnifying lens, the reader's attention is barely diverted from the engulfing green aura. The characters' profiles, however, are no less important as indicative of ideological issues to reflect on. Indeed, one of the main storylines in *The Overstory* captures the experience of a female scholar caught within the net of male peers who judge her work and govern her academic fate. Staging the question of gender inequality and discrimination in academia within the broader scope of environmentalism testifies to the presumed link between women and nature as twins in oppression.

We encounter Patricia Westerford, "queen of chlorophyll" or "Plant-Patty" as labeled by her mates on campus. As a child, she is described as immersed in nature, "her woodlands world," to the degree that the other children mock her as part of the vegetation itself, a "thing only borderline human" (Powers 115). She studies botany at the university, earns a PhD, and makes breakthrough revelations about the trees possessing the faculty to communicate and notify each other in case of danger, through chemicals they spread in the air as a kind of warning. She experiments with "one of her bagged trees under-scale insect invasions" (126), only to find out that "trees a little way off, untouched by the invading swarms, ramp up their defenses when their neighbor is attacked. Something alerts them. They get wind of the disaster and prepare . . . The wounded trees send out alarms that other trees smell . . . These brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other" (126). Message emission and recognition, she argues, are among the attributes that imply sentience and action, which imposes the revision of many scientific assumptions about the green world.

The reaction of the male professors, however, comes as no surprise. Putting into words in an official document their disdain for her findings, they state that "her methods are flawed and her statistics problematic," and that she "displays an almost embarrassing misunderstanding of the units of natural selection," to finally end up being stamped as "the woman who thinks that trees are intelligent" (127). Here, the text signals male authority in the academic context, the institutional power that preserves male privileges in scientific and scholarly circles. In their failure to recognize or respect women's research, they impose

psychological and practical constraints on the advancement of female careers over generations. This unjustified oppression creates a hierarchy of worth and dignity, along which women are devalued and restrained.

Although male-authored, the narrative enacts writing practices peculiar to "écriture féminine," a term developed by Hélène Cixous. In fact, "écriture féminine searches for a femininity marginalized within the symbolic order and tries to express it through female-body oriented writings that subvert the rules of Western logocentrism and phallocentrism" (Gutenberg 131). A clear hint that the symbolic order represents a site of gender tension is manifest in the board's report. The report "contains four uses of the word Patricia and no mention of Doctor" until the signature of the board of the three male scientists, mentioned as "doctors" (Powers 127). Thus, the professors even deny her the title of doctor, a linguistic signifier of excellence and worth.

The first move then is to unveil women's marginalization through this nested episode that exposes the abusive male prerogatives and interests in academia. Representing the major actants in higher education, the male board displays an unmistakable distrust of Patricia's scientific approach and rigor of method, too familiar for countless female scholars across nations. Academia as a site of hegemonic negotiations has long been governed by the "presumption of incompetence" of the non-white-western male (Harris and Gonzalez 2012). More specifically for the present study, "sexism" defined the terms of women's eligibility for academic positions and the "scientificity" of their works (Muhs et al.; Pereira; Crimmins 2019). Patricia's treatment stems from the view that women are inferior to men when it comes to "logic and rational reasoning"; a view that extends to their marginalization as "leaders in business, politics and academia" (Crimmins 4). With reverberations in the real world, these practices subject women to unfair criteria and downplay their competence. Based on studies conducted in developed countries among which the US, Canada, and the UK, Crimmins argues that even though "approximately half of the PhDs awarded go to women" in the new millennium, "the proportion of female tenures at the universities is lower than those of men, and it further decreases in positions as full professors" (5).

The poetics of "écriture féminine" extend beyond the linguistic domain. It is argued that "EF texts are never purely analytical but transform basic theoretical tenets into narratives containing strongly lyrical elements and inscriptions of corporeality" (Gutenberg 131).

Interestingly, Patricia's depiction puts the accent on her embodied dimension, especially manifest in the woods. Following the humiliation, Patricia retreats from academia and takes refuge in the woods, immersing herself in the green territory where she feels a sense of belonging. The night she resolves to commit suicide, nature contacts with her through her corporeality, and "something stops her. Signals flood her muscles, finer than words. Not this. Come with. Fear nothing" (Powers 128). This is where "the particle of her private self rejoins everything it has been split off from" (130). The discursive rendering of Patricia as a physical particle of the woods also rests on the methodical phrasing of her sentience. In the Northwestern forests she feels "underwater," which translates her impression of being flooded by the surrounding natural elements, to the extent that "if she holds still too long, vines will overrun her." Regarding the conflict between Man and the environment, Patricia "can hear, louder than the quaking leaves, which side will lose by winning" (144). Patricia's embodied immersion in nature sets a quasi-pre-symbolic order, in which the "Law of the Father" disappears, and the feminine 'jouissance' with nature prevails.

Ultimately, the female biologist is recast as part of vegetation, "a change in the weather … a clear wind rolling down from the hills" (121). The human/nature identification establishes the equation of both categories being under oppression. According to Ann E. Cudd, oppression "names a harm through which groups of persons are systematically and unfairly or unjustly constrained, burdened, or reduced by any of several social forces" (3721). The natural environment is being violated by human beings, and more essentially by practices stemming from an anthropocentric -masculinist- approach to the world. This particular node constitutes the intersection between gender discrimination and the ecological question, the female 'other' and the nonhuman 'other' are oppressed, hence a subtle fabrication of "écriture féminine" as the subtext of *The Overstory*.

The Interlaced Spheres of Compassion and Care Ethics

With Patricia Westerford, the narrative establishes environmental ethics as interlaced with the feminine. In fact, "she alone" can see "the oblique miracles that green can devise" (Powers 116). Powers' scheme in creating zones of contamination between the environmental question and the feminist struggle runs through the narrative, multiplying female

leaders in the ecological cause. Mother N, the chief activist in a forest camp of protesters, oversees guiding the newcomers in their rites of initiation. A very respectable figure, she stands for wise "mother nature," as the earth is commonly referred to; the pun on her name is unmistakable. A more complex character at the center of the epic journey for saving trees, Olivia Vandergrief, a failure as a student, becomes the leading figure of the protagonist's companions in the fight. In a narrative that borrows much from the fantasy tale, she drops her dull existence and follows invisible creatures as they direct her to the forest, where she is able to persuade the other protagonists to follow the voices and vibes of the woods. Together, they plan the sabotage of multiple shields for engines and bulldozers, owned by timber companies. The engineer who plans and designs the steps of these operations is another female character, Mimi Ma, a former successful engineer who quit the comfort of her job in a big corporation to answer the call of the trees.

Women are thus depicted as proactive, and inclined to self-denial and self-sacrifice, for the benefit of nature, and ultimately humanity. Pushing the similarity between women and trees to extremes, Powers draws on another characteristic of the female figure. The typical support networks that characterize feminist militancy and female bonding are found to prevail in nature as well. In fact, Patricia studies the bonding of the green elements, and she notes how "fungi . . . infuse into the roots of trees in partnerships so tight it's hard to say where one organism leaves off and the other begins" (Powers 142). This empathic sphere constitutes a portal for envisaging care ethics and moral responsibility toward a magnificent nonhuman 'other' that is entangled with the feminine.

Taking its power from a "lyrical" tone, typical of the mode of "écriture féminine," the narrative celebrates the American landscape and "America's perfect tree" (Powers 12), the "majestic" and "divine" redwood tree, with "health and power, size and beauty" (51). Descriptions of the green elements across the pages create an ethereal backstage for female protagonists while navigating their fates. The Ma tree is "too big. Too big to make sense of. Too big to credit as a living thing. It's a triple-wide door of darkness into the side of the night" with "an endless trunk. And up the trunk runs, straight up, beyond comprehension, an immortal, collective ecosystem" (193). Strategically, Powers then moves to paint the desolation of the land, as, across the continent, "hikers . . . want to know where the forests of their youth have gone" (91). Deforestation defines the newly constituted landscape. From the extensive use of

genetically modified organisms to pollution and the abuse of natural resources to twisted urban and coastal planning, Man is driving the earth to a state of irreversible damage, and no species will be spared. From a scientific perspective, humans meddle with "landscape patchiness," provoking change at the level of landscape and harming ecosystems (Armesto et al. 261).

Travelling through Idaho, Douglas, a veteran converted into an activist and the companion of Mimi Ma, is appalled by what he sees: "a stumpy desolation spreads in front of him. The ground bleeds reddish slag mixed with sawdust and slash . . . It's like the alien death rays have hit and the world is asking permission to end" (89). More poignantly, cleared of its trees, the land "looks like the shaved flank of a sick beast being readied for surgery" (90). This spectacle of disaster is a direct indictment of human activities and greed. Further still, in a systematic construction of Man as ignorant of the true essence of vegetation, his oblivion towards its diversity attracts mockery, as "the several hundred kinds of Hawthorn [trees] laugh at the single name they are forced to share" (1). Clearly expressed in the novel, the outrage at the human assault against biodiversity and ecosystems matches the current wave of scientific and scholarly voices that condemn the atrocity of human activities.

Lamenting the environmental degradation, Holmes Rolston (2013) writes that "[d]estroying species is like tearing pages out of an unread book, written in a language humans hardly know how to read, about the place where we live" (4973). Such is the comment on the inadequate or deficient political and legislative responses to the alarming loss of wildlife with its multiple species and diverse ecosystems. This diversity, deemed vital for human survival, is, according to experts, threatened as never before. The female gaze and cognition in the figure of Patricia are captivated by the biological diversity at the heart of the forest as an ecosystem. Beyond appearances, she senses, "it rains particles –spore clouds, broken webs, and mammal dander, skeletonized mites, bits of insect fuss and beard feather" (Powers 134). In agreement with Patricia's insight, voices from various disciplines surge to counter exclusive –yet limited- concern for the utterly visible, disregarding the fact that "[b]iology is multileveled, with processes at molecular, cellular, metabolic, organismic, species, ecosystems, and even global levels" (Rolston 4975). The invisible thus lies at the heart of the tree bark, where an unsuspected life-maintaining enterprise involves thousands of microscopic organisms, perhaps best described as such:

> the trunk turns into stacks of spreading metropolis, networks of conjoined cells pulsing with energy and liquid sun, water rising through long thin reeds, rings of them banded together into pipes that draw dissolved minerals up through the narrowing tunnels of transparent twigs and out through their waving tips while sun-made sustenance drops down in tubes just inside them. A colossal, rising, reaching, stretching space elevator of a billion independent parts, shuttling the air into the sky and storing the sky deep underground, sorting possibility out of nothing. (Powers 118)

The passage is a clear tribute by a contemplating gaze that stands in awe of the sublime spectacle of the life unfolding within a tree. However, "what humans are doing, or allowing to happen through carelessness, is shutting down the life stream, the most destructive event possible" (Rolston 4978). The fierce female activism in the novel is presented as a humanitarian intervention, in the same way, humans are supposed to respond to the genocides and atrocities some of their fellow helpless humans are subject to, in compliance with care ethics. Thus, the novel foregrounds the idea that "harm" as an ethically indictable concept equally applies to nonhumans, in line with feminist ethics. Diverging from the moral system devised by male authorities since the age of reason, ecofeminists attack the interest-driven consideration of nature that foregrounds its utilitarian dimension and its "failure" to apply to a moral status, that would entail duties towards its conservation. Humans as uniquely enjoying "sentience," "self-consciousness," "intentional states" and "rationality" are the ones entitled "to be part of a moral community, to understand and subscribe to agreed-upon norms, and to abide by these norms" (Bortolutti et al. 4803-4804).

For centuries then, trees and any living organism other than the human being were not considered "good in their own right," hence, no moral obligation whatsoever has been posited as an "imperative" in accordance with Kant's understanding of moral duty, the way it is the case towards humans, and to a lesser degree, animals. Proposing that Man and plants are embedded and interconnected in the conditions of their growth and survival, ecofeminists posit an ethic that extends moral agency to the green existents, central in the attempts to provoke measures to temper lethal human activities. Activities "that might cause pain or distress to the

living beings, human or nonhuman" (Bortolutti et al. 4803) are assessed with equal grids, even though nonhuman agents cannot report the harm occasioned. Consideration of being victims of "coercion" then, becomes a justly distributed state, allowing moral assessment for nonhuman entities. It is largely agreed that the green entities can accurately qualify for the position of victims and, instead of reparations for unjust harm, Man can prevent future damage and rescue the remaining endangered flora species. Ecofeminists adopt the view that "the ability to empathize and care is necessary for ethics, ethical reasoning, and ethical decision making" (Warren 232), for a new conceptualization of ecological ethics.

Borrowing the words of Patricia, the scientist, "the things people know for sure will change. There is no knowing *for a fact*" (Powers 118). Patricia's reasoning is in line with the ecofeminist critique of the "romantic and heroic narrative underlying masculinized environmental ethics" (Gaard 1539). It is with his pioneering article "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis" (1967) that Lynn White, Jr. initiated the anti-anthropocentric view. He claims that Man was given supremacy through the story of creation in the Judeo-Christian narratives, which center on "the divine sanction of human control and mastery over nature" (Minteer 59). The article was a starting point in what would become an academic wave backed by philosophers, especially Richard Routley, who called for a reconceptualization of environmental ethics in relation to anthropocentrism (Minteer 59). With the intensification of the debates, feminists had finally found the ground to frame what they long believed to be intertwined with their cause: an ethical consideration of nature. Feminists showed that understanding the way nature is coerced can contribute to understanding the ways women are subordinated. Indeed, "ecological feminism posits a variety of connections between the domination of women (and other Others) and the domination of "nature," all by the same entity: the "ratio-normative, hetero-normative, white male human being" (Warren 228), through "feminizing nature" and "naturalizing women" (Warren 230). It has thus been theorized that women and nature undergo the same conceptual oppressive attitudes and assumptions that "explain, maintain, and "justify" relationships of (unjustifiable) domination and subordination" (Warren 231), hence the revision of male anthropocentrism.

In agreement with the feminist lens, a careful painting of a community of oppressed or marginalized others informs the narrative trajectory of *The Overstory*. In addition to Patricia as a devalued female

scholar, we encounter diverse complex characters, each representing an infirmity, a specific ethnic background, or a social class. Mimi Ma, who is an engineer, is the daughter of a Chinese immigrant, who chose to deny his origins, language, and culture, to fit into an unforgiving job market. In fact, "[h]e's a small, cute, smiling, warm, Muslim Chinese guy who loves math, American cars, elections, and camping . . . But he never speaks Chinese, not even in Chinatown;" and he tells Mimi "of all the Stranded Scholars, changed into Americans by the Displaced Persons Act" (Powers 20). The pressure of assimilation and fear of discrimination thus, punctuate the lives of immigrants in the US, with differing degrees. Equally distressed, Neelay's father, an Indian immigrant, goes to great lengths to proceed unnoticed, adopting the American lifestyle and working extremely hard in his position to prove worthy of staying on American soil; a poor father, "who has made himself invisible for years, just for the right to live and work in this golden State" (Powers 118). Neelay is also disabled and his advancement in society is only made possible by his genius at coding and creating video games.

Another figure at the periphery of 'normality,' Adam Appiah, as his mother says, "is a little socially retarded" and "[t]he school nurse says to keep an eye" (63). It turns out that he is an autistic boy who grows suspicious of the educational system after numerous misfortunes in a school system that fails to understand him. Diversifying profiles, the author introduces Douglas, a veteran with a crashed leg following a mission in Vietnam. He is rejected by the system as "THE AIR FORCE has no use for gimps" (99). Douglas dedicates his life to replanting the American forest, attracting the reader's empathy and concern, given the complexity of the legacy of the Vietnam War. These characters are made to meet and become the "defenders" of the American trees, populating the narrative with sensibilities that interlace with the feminine, the trees, and the microorganisms of the woods, to ultimately constitute the fabric of a patch of human and nonhuman existence.

Providing this inclusive framework imports "moral duties" from the human sphere to be applicable for the inanimate beings. Along a valid analogy with the ethics addressing human harm and injustice, the question of ecology under ecofeminism enjoys the reconceptualization of such notions as "care," "justice," "moral imperative" and "worth," creating the conceptual triggers for concrete action and timely rescue measures. In *The Overstory*, Man and nature are proposed as mutually dependent and analogous. Addressing the human being, the woods in the

narrative whisper "if you would learn the secrets of Nature, you must practice more humanity" (Powers 5). This suggests the merging of the human with the natural in an irrevocably entangled state. The aspiration is to secure what is taken for granted as "an inalienable quality" for humans, that is, the "possession of an inherent, unearned form of worth or standing," as the basis of rights and "moral claims" on others (Fitzpatrick 5546). As noted by Patricia, the tree is "strong and wide but full of grace, flaring out nobly at the base, into its own plinth. Generous with nuts that feed all comers . . . Elegant with sturdy boughs so much like human arms, lifting upward at the tips like hands proffering?" (Powers 116), openly articulating the analogy.

Contrary to an approach that is collaborative with "the rationalist tradition" that de-emotionalizes ecological approaches and advances a disembodied view of the self which severs its conduct and cognition from its surroundings (Warren 234), *The Overstory* is a tale of interdependent selves deeply engrained in idiosyncratic social circumstances, each experiencing oppression, to constitute a community of 'others' assembled by empathy. As such, an eco-narrative fashioned along ecofeminist ethics emerges "from the 'voices' of entities located in different historical circumstances . . . a kind of narrative about humans, human-human relationships, and human-nonhuman animal or nature relationships" (Warren 232).

Ultimately, Patricia's research is confirmed by other scholars, and she is finally able to disclose to the world "how trees talk to one another, over the air and underground. How they care and feed each other, orchestrating shared behaviors through the networked soil. How they build immune systems as wide as a forest" (Powers 212). In the fight for trees, Olivia sadly dies at an explosion she has orchestrated with her companions, in an ultimate act of sacrifice for nature, giving her life for the survival of the nonhuman species. Uncannily similar, "before it dies, a Douglas-fir, half a million old, will send its storehouse of chemicals back down into its roots and out through its fungal partners, donating its riches to the community pool in a last will testament" (Powers 215). Powers consistently depicts trees and women as partners and kin in their fight, generosity, and sacrifice, allowing the feminist view of human-plant entanglement full articulation.

While the systematic framing of the ecological question advocates feminist ethics, the ending of *The Overstory* seems perplexing.

With Olivia's death, Mimi Ma and the other protagonists embark on an anonymous existence, hiding from the authorities. Patricia commits suicide, and Adam is caught to answer for "domestic terrorism." In a dream-like vision, he witnesses how the city is invaded by stretches of forests, greening the buildings and replacing concrete. Thwarting the readers' utopic expectations that the female characters will triumph in their fight tempers the promise of an easy resolution and suggests the long and painful struggle that will be needed to save the planet. The ending seems to issue a kind of warning against extreme attitudes and single-thread frameworks. Indeed, the risk is to replace male essentialism with female-centeredness, according to which the view of women as better carers for nature is advanced as another stereotype. Indeed, the figure of Patricia's father is an eloquent illustration of this view. He is the one who instructs her about nature, with full acceptance of her difference, as he "alone understands her woodlands world" (Powers 129). Endowed with affective sentiments towards nature, "[h]e tells her, on their drives, about all the oblique miracles that green can devise," criticizing how Man is "plant-blind" (130). Thus, ecofeminism is foregrounded in the novel, yet, with no naïve claims that it is exclusive. To their credit, ecofeminists believe "that, as a feminist ethic, it is gender biased, but claims that this is a better bias (more inclusive and therefore less partial) bias than a male-gendered bias or biases that exclude the voices of the dominated" (Warren 232). The narrative thus generates no illusions as to the complexity of the ecological question. It, however, knits together empathy, care, and ethical consideration to forge a new path for environmental studies, under the auspices of the feminine "sense and sensibility."

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that the narrative of *The Overstory* spells the contours of an "écriture féminine" through gender discrimination in academia, female sentience and embodiment, the lyrical tone, and female heroism. Further consolidating the feminist framework, the narrative is preoccupied with multidimensional oppression, making the case for multiplicity and diversity through the different characters. Sketching the script of the adequate response to address the violations, "empathy, care, and connection figure strongly in ecofeminist discussions of animal defense and vegetarianism" (Gaard 1540), emphasizing the intrinsic value of plants and more broadly nonhuman entities; a value that is

independent of human ends. The nonhuman creature emerges as a "right-holder," implying duties of "care" and protection on the "second party," "whose conduct is normatively directed by that right" (Martin 4628), eschewing issues of autonomy and agency as prerequisites for eligibility for moral consideration. Empathy and science, as displayed by Patricia, constitute the spirit of ecofeminist ethics, contending that "tree and you still share a quarter of your genes," in the words of Patricia (Powers 133). As such, deviating from the accepted conception of nature as secondary to humans, feminist environmental ethics view nature not as the stage for human action and existence, providing location, landscape, and resources; the land, rather, with the diversity of its visible and invisible green components, along with animals, constitute a community to which the human being only belongs to in contrast to masters. By advocating "creative problem-solving in developing life-affirming, environmentally and socially sustainable, biologically and culturally diverse practices, policies, lifestyles, and communities of choice" (Warren 229), ecofeminist ethics, it seems, lay the ground to extend justice to our biological kin: the nonhuman 'other,' just the way the diverse cast of human and nonhuman beings are entangled in *The Overstory*. Yet, the narrative moves beyond the dualism and binarism that have long characterized Western thought. By including male characters as stubborn environmental activists, *The Overstory* shows how "the imagination can be used to create eco-friendly, humanistic norms, such as masculinities/femininities without hierarchies" (Rose 327).

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