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Home Repair: A fictocritical investigation into ecological existentialism

REFLECTION STATEMENT

In pairing notions prevalent within Deborah Bird Rose's theory of 'ecological existentialism' with Richard Powers' 2018 epic novel, *The Overstory*, my fictocritical piece, *Home Repair*, confronts the particularly neglected ideologies that surround extinction, with a strong focus on the damaging forces that are associated with the Anthropocene epoch, in which humankind place themselves greater than and dominant to the natural world. In doing so, I accentuate the need for the individual, and thus society, to reintegrate themselves back into the natural world as equals, prompting a further change from the Anthropocene and into the Symbiocene, where humans symbiotically reintegrate themselves emotionally, psychologically and technologically, into nature and natural systems. Through my research, I found a common theme in which there are difficulties in adequately articulating the problem of extinction, ultimately leading to an arrogant denial of the possibility of such an event occurring.

Throughout my English studies in Years 11 and 12, I found an interest in how authors can hide truths behind fiction, which ultimately led to my chosen form of fictocriticism, which blends a fictional piece with a critical response. With this, I draw from elements of fiction and academic and philosophical theories.

HOME REPAIR

“When the world was ending the first time, Noah took all the animals, two by two, and loaded them aboard his escape craft for evacuation. But...he left the plants to die. He failed to take the one thing he needed to rebuild life on land, and concentrated on saving the freeloaders!”

The problem was, Noah and his kind didn't believe that plants were really alive. No intentions, no vital spark. Just like rocks that happened to get bigger.”¹

– Richard Powers, ‘The Overstory’

“Certainty kills God, because it denies God's own freedom to intervene in the world unpredictably...”

Certainty calls us to renounce our own selfhood, on the same grounds; Certainty calls us to ‘renounce the world and that which is in the world’ on the same grounds— that the world is transient, subject to death and fraught with uncertainty.”²

– Lev Shestov

1 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*. W. W. Norton & Company.

2 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming: Love and extinction*. University of Virginia Press.

First, I need a title.

'Love and control'
'Love and extinction'
'Love and harm'

'Confronting essential environmental questions before catastrophe'

Come back to this later.

If the human mind can relinquish itself in fiction, what is stopping us as readers from expanding above and beyond our traditional modes and conventions, the ways in which we perceive the world in direct relation to our current ecological state?

Expand this introduction.

Who are we as a species? Such questions have become ever so present as we continue to face our current climate crisis. In relation to extinction, what good (*or maybe, what hope, what benefit?*) do we offer to the world? (*If any at all?*)

Love in the time of extinction, “[w]e can love a place and still be dangerous to it,”³ love in action, in caring and affectionate ways.

How can we love something, yet cause so much harm?
Does it come down to ethics?
Am I missing the point?

Problem solving in the face of adversity?

Is that what I'm looking at?

...

3 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming*

He worked barefoot. His toes would usually dance, shuffle and tap on the timber floorboards while he was writing. The mahogany desk was a variety of dark browns and deep reds, each grain beaming with pride. Its roots once living, breathing and communicating; now its roots were holding ideas, research and ambitions. A novel, *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, sat unaccompanied under his desk lamp. The view out the window was nothing special.

He had two options; either knock down and start again, or keep what was there and restore, reframe, potentially even reimagine. The interior had not changed since childhood. The fifth floorboard into the house still squeaked. He felt guilty that he didn't see it sooner; the house was left in his name just under two years ago. This guilt worked in his favour, it provided him with a subconscious fuel to expand, above and beyond, not only the house but himself.

It didn't help that he decided to start repairing the house at the same time he started his latest research paper, but within a year he had one room completely restored, his everything room. The pine walls wrote a story, each grain a lifetime, every chip, crack and knot contained more knowledge than he could ever imagine. Once these walls were part of a much bigger community, observing and living, now they provided him a space to repair and restore.

A single painting hung on the wall, 'The Goddess of Earth' an artwork of Gaia in an impressionist style, her transcendent aura shone bright enough for him to see beyond the painting. He found his eyes trapped. Her whole body was fluid and alive, caring and protecting. He travelled deeper, her hair dancing banyan trees and her arms waterfalls. Deeper once more, her feet sand, her toes soft cream shells with striking orange, red and brown lines throughout. He heard her whisper, something soft, too soft to decipher. He went deeper, his toes now next to hers, her feet opposite his, on the same land.

I was here.

I've been here.

I am here.

know.

Everything you know, I

He wrote.

Home Repair

Introduction

If the human mind can relinquish itself in fiction, what is stopping us as readers from expanding above and beyond our traditional modes and conventions, the ways in which we perceive the world in direct relation to our current ecological state? To examine this, 'ecological existentialism', as defined by Deborah Bird Rose, is a response to "the two big shifts in Western thought that define our current moment: the shift into uncertainty and the shift into connectivity."⁴ Rose proposes that humankind's want for "order, certainty and predictability"⁵ is a leading factor in our current state of the Anthropocene, the current period in history in which human activity significantly impacts the natural world.⁶ Proposing the complex nature of the uncertain is the way forward, prompting a further change into connectivity and interconnectedness. By applying Rose's ideas to Richard Powers' 2018 novel *The Overstory*, I will not only explore the present dangers of extinction in which our denialistic negation of the problem is another leading factor in our current state of the Anthropocene, but also examine "Plant Blindness,"⁷ - one's inability to see or notice plants in everyday life. Through the application of Rose's ideas - that "ecological existentialism enjoins us to live within the dynamics, and to pour our love into this unstable and uncertain Earth"⁸ and exploring the negation of extinction, I will investigate how in order to continue to flourish as a species we must understand the devastating impacts of our actions and mindsets upon the natural world; eliminating the dominant ideology of superiority and in turn placing ourselves within nature, never separate from it. In doing so, I endeavour

4 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming*

5 Ibid.

6 Society, N. G. (2022, May 20). *Anthropocene. Education*. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/anthropocene/>

7 Achurra, A. (2022). *Plant blindness: A focus on its biological basis*. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.963448>

8 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming*

to articulate how ever present perceptions must shift from 'plant blindness' to 'plant consciousness' prompting the further change from the Anthropocene to Albrecht's notion of the Symbiocene: "that period in Earth's history where humans symbiotically reintegrate themselves, emotionally, psychologically and technologically, into nature and natural systems."⁹ Therefore, reintegration of human life into the natural world is essential for survival as a species, before it becomes too late.

Extinction

Confronting extinction with a dark sense of optimism

Aligning with ecological existentialism, the anxieties surrounding the destruction of land and the interconnectedness of the natural world are prominent themes within *The Overstory*, ultimately confronting us with harsh realities of a direction towards potential extinction. Powers understands humankind's want for "order, certainty and predictability"¹⁰, and thus promotes the unstable uncertain. Powers introduces the reader to nine vital characters possessed with varied contexts. By novel's end these nine characters flourish into committed activists, alerted as to how humankind in itself is "deeply ill."¹¹ The journey of each of the nine characters mimics the cycle of the four sections of the book: Roots, Trunk, Crown and Seeds.

In 'Roots' readers are provided with a narrative synopsis of these main characters forming a structure for the whole novel. Moving up the tree to the 'Trunk', the nine different roots come together as one; connections are established between characters and common ideals form regarding their concerns for the plant kingdom and the devastating role played by humankind.

As one character asks: "What on Earth is happening?"¹² Although multiple different paths from 'Roots' meet in 'Trunk' forming a sense of connectivity, conceptually there are far greater uncertainties explored. The uncertainties only heighten the ecological anxiety an individual might face, but it is a necessary step forward, even if the despair

9 Albrecht, G. (n.d.). *Glenn Albrecht's future vision. Symbioscene*. <https://symbioscene.com/invitation-to-the-symbiocene/#:~:text=The%20Symbiocene%20will%20be%20characterised,found%20in%20all%20living%20systems>

10 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming*

11 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*

12 Ibid.

might feel intolerable. As a species we are constantly looking for external forces, objects and ideas for an escape, or upon which to place blame. The nine protagonists evolve into comprehensively aware ecological activists striving for a change, allowing them to ponder the human condition in a final desperation to make visible the dangers of extinction. These characters, in various ways, feel sympathy towards the plant kingdom and are ashamed by our hubristic domination. One character, Nicholas Hoel, aspires that “green has a plan that will make the age of mammals seem like a minor detour.”¹³ And Douglas Pavlicek tells his planted seedlings, “Hang on...you just have to outlast us.”¹⁴ Yet it is wrong to assume Powers approaches our future in an almost a nihilistic way; he actually “embraces a dark optimism about the fate of humanity,”¹⁵ implying how there is still hope, but ultimately it is up to human action. In understanding where humankind might be heading, Powers takes action through the form of fiction. Ray Brinkman, another character, blames the fall of humankind on fiction itself, “The world is failing precisely because no novel can make the contest for the world seem as compelling as the struggles between a few lost people.”¹⁶ Ironically, this is exactly what Powers does: he creates that compelling story that brings to light the several uncomfortably brutal truths about the flaws in human civilisation. It is a sentiment echoed by Powers’ character Adam Appich: “The best arguments in the world won’t change a person’s mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story.”¹⁷ In doing so, Powers positions readers to mimetically parallel, accentuating “the conflicting notions of commodity and community,”¹⁸ in how they want to have order versus the unstable reality. Throughout *The Overstory* the characters grapple with the lonely sense of extinction and thus ultimately reveal the common negation of such a topic; stemming from and aligning with the ever-present anthropocentric ideologies in which humans place themselves greater than and more important than plants and animals alike.

13 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*

14 Ibid.

15 Rich, N. (2018, June). *The Novel That Asks, ‘What Went Wrong With Mankind?’* <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/06/richard-powers-theoverstory/559106/>

16 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*

17 Ibid.

18 Powers, R., & McKibben, B. (2019, October 25). *Richard Powers & Bill McKibben Discuss The Overstory* | JCCSF. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CVdc_1HaMU&t=3320s

Gaia Hypothesis: The acknowledgement of interconnectedness

“Earth may be alive: not as the ancients saw her—a sentient Goddess with a purpose and foresight—but alive like a tree.”¹⁹

— James Lovelock

Before the Anthropocene, Earth, as a physical object, provided life with a home, a platform to thrive; life as whole interacted with the earth with a known commensalism. Now as we start to see the impacts of our ignorance this relationship has moved to parasitism, in which humans (parasite) are harming the Earth (the host). The understanding of our changing environment and symbiotic relationships can help us shift away from the Anthropocene, and into the Symbiocene where neither party is harmed, and instead humankind embraces and nurtures all forms of life. The word ‘symbiocene’ dates back to the ancient Greek word Symbiosis (συμβίωσις) (symbiōsis): ‘living together’.

To commence this exploration of the devastating impacts of disconnection it is first important to understand the vast interconnectedness of the natural world. We interact with non-living things every day: houses, homes, doors, windows, bikes; an endless list. It is these very objects that help humankind thrive, these systems allow individuals to form their own interconnectedness, reacting and living within these certain dynamics. Similarly, Lovelock’s ‘Gaia Hypothesis’ proposes “living organisms on the planet interact with their surrounding inorganic environment to form a synergetic and self-regulating system that created, and now maintains, the climate and biochemical conditions that make life on Earth possible.”²⁰ Hence, Lovelock reveals, despite a series of devastating disruptions, Earth continues to remain habitable.²¹ Powers’ understanding of this notion comes through the form of a sense of despair and individuals’ inability to comprehend such philosophical and physical notions. This is the starting point of expansion; firstly, humankind must acknowledge the self-sustaining and “self-regulating”²² system that the plant kingdom is, and then we will be able to look at it as equally diverse and complex. Humankind’s negation of

19 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*

20 Lovelock, J. (2009). *Gaia: A new look at life on Earth*. Oxford University Press.

21 Ibid.

22 T Lenton, *Centre for Ecology and Hydrology*, Edinburgh, UK (Gaia Hypothesis)

the plant world accentuates a parasitic relationship: we see ourselves as dominant and all powerful when, in turn, we are just termites chewing and destroying the structure, until finally, it all collapses. This shift to a new alternative concept - the plant kingdom as a living and deeply interconnected organism - will allow us to live side by side with nature in a complete symbiosis.

Gaia: serene, transcendent, her skin radiates warmth.

You really are alive.

Alive? My child, I am decaying.

But you are dying.

All his work up until this point had come to a halt. He had the opportunity to gain an insight; a warning? In him, like the meteor that collided with earth bringing about extinction, one thing now died at the expense of another being born.

How long do we have?

Is that rude to ask?

But the earth isn't dying.

Isn't it?

You are dying. The earth will stay around a lot longer than you.

I give life to all beings; plant and animal.

So they too can sing and dance on my skin.

The warm glow that illuminated from the centre of her body opened his mind from a seedling to a sapling.

De-extinction: Finding the scapegoat

Extinction is a notion often met with despair or denial, this reaction stemming from humankind's inability to believe such a catastrophic event could happen to such a superior species. This superiority makes us "like the king[s] of creation,"²³ in which our perspectives have narrowed, blinding us into living within "the thinnest artery of pretend life."²⁴ This phantasmagorical belief that humankind will be around forever has enhanced our ignorance as a species. As such, Powers, through fiction, blends harsh truths behind a wall of imagination inviting readers to explore the destruction of the natural world and invites a personal response:

"The world had six trillion trees, when people showed up.
Half remain. Half more will disappear, in a hundred years.
And whatever enough people say that all these vanishing
trees are saying is what, in fact, they say..."

23 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*

24 Ibid.

What did the dead Joan of Arc hear? Insight or delusion?”²⁵

What do we hear?

The term ‘de-extinction’ is a current example of language that has “that has given conservation efforts a tragically false sense of accomplishment,”²⁶ accentuating the notion that extinction is reversible, ultimately diminishing the severity of such an event.²⁷ Thus, the term exacerbates anxieties expressed by Powers and Rose, in which a society that seeks certainty commonly mistakes agreement for truth as it negates the brutality of truth and instability of the uncertain. Terms such as ‘de-extinction’ have the ability to influence attitudes as they allow individuals a scapegoat, that ultimately results in the creation of ethical blindness.²⁸ However, there is an underlying challenge to articulate and thus inspire individuals and society about the indispensable change needed for a recognition of the value of the natural world.²⁹ Powers allows his readers to parallel the growth of his protagonists; all grow into increasingly aware activists. Powers effectively takes the reading beyond the common dialectical process, digging beneath the fabric of social life and uncovering harsh but necessary truths.³⁰ Thus, he successfully articulates the danger of extinction and the psychological anxieties that come with it. We could leave this earth with our mark, not so much a “*spectacular crash*”³¹, more a devastating travesty. The headline would read: *Earth’s luckiest beings fall subject to their own arrogance*. It is now more than ever, Powers warns, that “we are driving ourselves and our world into an ever-expanding death space,”³² a state of living that will not be reversible.

25 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*

26 Campagna, C., Guevara, D., & Le Boeuf, B. (2017). *De-extinction may hasten continuing extinctions*. *Hastings Center Report*, 47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hast.752>

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Horkheimer, M. (1972). *Critical theory ; selected essays*: Translated by Matthew J. O’CONNELL and others. Herder and Herder.

31 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*

32 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming*

Opening extinction to a wider audience and proposing a kinship

I now move forward to examine how dramatic biodiversity loss is a leading factor in extinction, which, as Bostrom defines, is an ‘existential risk’: “those that threaten the entire future of humanity... despite their importance, issues surrounding human-extinction risks and related hazards remain poorly understood.”³³ It is not because we can’t understand extinction, it is because society does not want to understand such a ‘devastating’ disaster. Society chooses not to face the harsh reality of what could happen in the near future, but why? One counterargument is that we need to re-explore the harsh ideologies of modernity and post modernity. Yet, if we relinquish wholly to these values, they will only subside the progress above and beyond traditional conventions. However, ecological existentialism explores such ideologies, in the sense that it calls us to abandon certainty and embrace the unstable uncertain. We must live in knowing we have no predetermined essence, as Rose attests, there are no guarantees in an uncertain world, “no future point of perfection toward which all is moving, and there is no whole that directs us.”³⁴ Initially, this cognitive shift could result in despair and a feeling of hopeless bewilderment, but this initial growth prompts exponential change. This embracement in turn will promote individuals to relinquish to the dynamics of the natural world, calling for a symbiotic involvement: “ecological existentialism thus proposes a kinship of becoming: no telos, no deus ex machina to rescue us, no clockwork to keep us ticking along.”³⁵ Bostrom understands the blinding nature of certainty and the instability of society’s future, and thus his research explores the likelihood of extinction due to human activities.³⁶ Apart from chance, the destruction of the ozone layer and dramatic loss of biodiversity are two of the four most severe existential risks. Aligning with Powers, Bostrom’s qualitative exploration and articulation of existential risks allows individuals to create connections between introduced risks and thus the threats they impose.

For decades society adhered to the narrative that external forces would be the end of the world: the sun blowing up, a meteor strike, perhaps even artificial intelligence. Now it is clear that we are that external force; rulers, arrogantly perched on top of a dying throne, always looking outside for the threat, ignorantly unaccustomed to seeing it inside of ourselves. We love words such as de-extinction as they provide us with that false sense of hope, making us feel as if we are doing positive things to reverse our

33 Bostrom, N. (2013). *Existential risk prevention as global priority*. *Global Policy*, 4(1), 15-31. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12002>

34 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming*.

35 Ibid

36 Bostrom, N. (2013). *Existential risk prevention as global priority*

damage. It is not until we confront our ecological anxieties and immerse ourselves into the natural world reforming that lost relationship, then we will be able to flourish. It is similar to viewing an artwork, one can exist outside of it, merely viewing it. The alternative is to be immersed within the artwork, feeling and living. This beauty of the unknown continues to be rejected.

I have been writing and researching for years, but, just recently I feel lost.

Since he was a young seedling, his two muddy feet paved the way, walking through tough terrain and isolated landscapes. His feet sunk deep into the earth reaching a connection no one thought was possible. Yet in this instance he couldn't seem to grapple the roots, they were too deep and needed too much digging for one man alone.

This feeling is natural, especially as of now.

But you

Are

Not

Alone.

The glow from the centre of her body pulsed, mimicking a heart beat.

Like a plant confined to its pot, you only grow as much as you can. You have been planted, sprouted and grown within a pot, your roots restricted to an unnatural growth, entangled and twisted.

It

Is

Time.

Break Free.

Hyperobjects: Expanding above and beyond

Along with problems of articulation, another barrier society faces is the individual detestation of expanding psychological values beyond those which are pre-installed within. Ecological philosopher Timothy Morton developed the idea of 'hyperobjects', something that surrounds and entangles society, but is too massive to comprehend.³⁷ They are often entities immensely large in scale and vastly complex; this situation results in the subsided comprehension of their function altogether or a belief in a false agreement. Examples include the global financial system, tectonic plates, the solar system, black holes and global warming.³⁸

Morton challenges the anthropocentric threads of the 21st century through suggesting that humankind's current thoughts and perceptions must evolve and expand above and beyond traditional modes and conventions. Morton proposes that "hyperobjects are directly responsible for ...the end of the world, rendering both denialism and apocalyptic environmentalism obsolete."³⁹ Societies' innate denial of confronting truths comes forth once again, although Morton does not state extinction itself to be a hyperobject, he does think however that "species in themselves are hyperobjects, as intuitively extinction is the disappearance of those species, and what makes that like a hyperobject is that I can't directly see it."⁴⁰ Extinction in itself is not something individuals cannot comprehend, it is the product of extinction that is difficult to comprehend; the loss of completely everything. This is just one example of theorists proposing an expansion above and beyond current understandings of not only the

37 Morton, T. (2021). *Hyperobjects philosophy and ecology after the end of the world*. University of Minnesota Press.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

natural world but a variety of uncomfortable philosophical questions. We, potentially through hyperobjects, must embrace the unknown and seek the uncertain. To continue forward it is relevant to point out that this embracement will not diminish our innate desire to explore and expand as a species. “Our desire to know encounters the mystery inherent in the fact that knowing can never be complete, and we are hooked.”⁴¹ Desire, mystery, uncertainty, the unknown. We as a species yearn for it, we have always wanted to expand as a species but have halted despite fear of the unknown; we are a plane with no pilot, a plan to a house with no builder.

Gaia cupped her hands over him creating a shelter, pulsating a golden glow, and like a caricature in a zoetrope, images ran around her hands, reversing time. The images moved at such a speed he closed his eyes; when he opened them again, she was next to him.

Walk with me, I would like to show you something.

Gaia danced across the ground, gliding effortlessly. Each step sparked a warm light from the ground. At first he was reluctant, he laughed in awe of her grace, but not long after he relinquished to a dance that freed his roots. A golden light shot out beneath their feet, contrasting the rich turquoise blue and dark greens of her skin. The light began to run up the walls, pulsating to the beat they stomped. They stomped, and stomped, and stomped until the light fully encapsulated the walls, and with a great relief, it...

41 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming*

Plant blindness within ‘The Overstory’ and everyday life

Extending further from relinquishing anthropocentric ideologies to symbiocentric ones, Wandersee and Schussler’s theory ‘plant blindness’, “explores the inability to see or notice plants in one’s everyday life, and maintains a belief of plant inferiority to animal and human.”⁴² There is a call to action for individuals to appreciate the vast interconnectedness of the natural world, and its unquestionably unique dynamics to self-repair, self-change, and self-realise.⁴³ The recognition of plant blindness in itself uncovers common misconceptions about the plant kingdom. With this, Wandersee and Schussler applied their understanding of the ‘symptoms’ of plant blindness into a table that targets the vast majority of individuals and everyday life. (Table 1)

One may suffer from plant blindness when. . .

- ...one does not see, show interest on, or pay attention to plants in his/her life
- ...one believes that the unique role of plants is to be the support for animals
- ...one does not understand what plants need to grow
- ...one does not notice that plants are essential in his/her daily routine
- ...one misunderstands the time scales regarding plant and animal activity
- ...one has never grown plants, make observations of their anatomy or processes, or identify plants
- ...one does not understand the plant model, among others, basic functions as nutrition and reproduction, and simple plant ecology

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Table 1. Indicators for plant blindness as defined by Wandersee and Schussler (1999).⁴⁵

As such, Powers is ultimately aware of the dangers plant blindness poses to society as it entrances plant life under an oppressive state of control. Powers critiques and

42 Achurra, A. (2022). *Plant blindness: A focus on its biological basis*. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.963448>

43 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming*

44 Achurra, A. (2022). *Plant blindness*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.963448>

45 Ibid.

questions modern day society and their treatment towards plant, by directly stating how we must shift our current chain of thought “from plant blindness into plant consciousness.”⁴⁶ This shift is clear through the development of his characters into ecologically aware activists who strive for change and awareness, with a particular focus on the importance of trees.

“No one sees trees. We see fruit, we see nuts, we see wood, we see shade... obstacles blocking the road or wrecking the ski slope. Dark, threatening places that must be cleared...but trees—trees are invisible.”⁴⁷

In particular, the character Patricia Westerford is not only the central dendrologist in the novel but also is the ultimate embodiment of Powers’ endeavours and promoting his core beliefs. Such notions are accentuated throughout Westerford’s speech, the climax of the novel, where the characters’ values and beliefs leading up to this point are tested, these struggling individuals grapple with hopelessness and despair but find solace amongst the conflicting emotions of uncertainty and connectivity. Westerford expresses Powers’ greatest anxieties surrounding the plant kingdom: “we know that plants communicate and remember...[w]e’ve begun to understand the profound ties between trees and people. But our separation has grown faster than our connection.”⁴⁸ The strive for certainty has taken society further from the truth, ultimately creating a stark separation between humans and plants. Similarly Rose writes, “systems are full of unpredictability and uncertainty... the organism, or the ecosystem...is working with the uncertainties of change and striving to sustain its own flourishing.”⁴⁹ Thus, Powers, through fiction, and Rose, through theory, suggest that a recognition of the sheer complexity of plant systems will in turn shift oppressive mindsets to an equal astonishment.

Powers himself has a visceral astonishment as he recognises how the plant kingdom communicates through “over the air signalling” and “underground resource sharing”,

46 Powers, R., & McKibben, B. (2019, October 25). *Richard Powers & Bill McKibben Discuss The Overstory* | JCCSF. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICVdc_1HaMU&t=3320s

47 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*

48 Ibid.

49 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming*

they also have “complex and supple behaviours rightly described as memory” which allows plants to be “flexible in the face of environmental change or danger.”⁵⁰ From this Powers directly translates his visceral astonishment into Westerford. “There’s a tree for every purpose under heaven. Their chemistry is astonishing...They’re learning to make whatever can be made. And most of what they make we haven’t even identified.”⁵¹ Powers does not stop at information, he unlocks a new pathway as he calls to question the reader’s direct ethics and thought process, questioning if Humankind will ever be satisfied. Desire for innovation and expansion is a great thing, but desire needs to be treated with caution as it can result in a contextually present hubristic blindness; “how much is enough. His answer: Just a little bit more.”⁵² This drive for a ‘little bit more’ has devastatingly adverse effects as it spirals out of control, “Just a little more timber. A few more jobs. A few more acres of cornfield... You know? There’s never been any material more useful than wood.”⁵³ A worry that Powers poses, which is heightened by Rose, is that society cannot let the downward spiral of desire fall out of our own control, thus, when our damages to the natural world become so severe, they’re irreversible.

Humankind and plants must share a symbiotic relationship, “to appreciate the differences between humankind and others, while at the same time also understanding that we are all interdependent.”⁵⁴ This notion of interdependence is a prominent ideology promoted by Powers. This interdependent relationship doesn’t favour one side, “trees want something from us, just as we’ve always wanted things from them... the ‘environment’ is alive—a fluid, changing web of purposeful lives dependent on each other. Love and war can’t be teased apart.”⁵⁵ I see war in this instance as representative of dominance and control, to have love, but deep down an urge for dominance and control; instead of loving and caring in equal ways, feeling and being equal to the one being loved. We could relinquish ourselves to understanding the plant kingdom, appreciating its vastly complex yet interconnected nature, We could open our eyes and our minds to the plant kingdom around us, embrace the uncertainty and shift out anthropocentric ideologies such as plant blindness in order to transition into a mutually sustainable lifestyle - the Symbiocene.

50 Powers, R., & McKibben, B. (2019, October 25). *Richard Powers & Bill McKibben Discuss The Overstory*

51 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming*

55 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*

Images of the plant kingdom were played within and across the palms of her hands. The images came to life, dancing and singing. And then, finally stopping.

What is this?

I have taken you back to the

Cambrian period

Mesozoic Era

Pleistocene epoch

*Life was creating; trilobites, brachiopods, and chordates.
The most intense burst of evolution.*

The images flicked once more, new scenery. There were people.

*The Holocene, this is the first time where humans started
to cultivate my skin and harness the earth's natural
resources.*

Sustainably.

He had no reply, he ran his fingers across her palms and took in every small detail. Life seemed simple.

After a few minutes the images changed suddenly and sharply.

The Anthropocene.

People were laughing and taking photos. It seemed quite jolly. He felt at home. He stepped closer to her hands to investigate what was happening, diving deeper into the

image, to the point of full immersion. Fiery images flashed before his eyes, there was no singing or dancing. He heard the whistling screams of trees and piercing cries from animals.

I'm sorry.

What for?

All of that.

There you have it, that's your answer.

It's one thing to apologise,

But it's a powerful thing to take action.

Conclusion: From the Anthropocene to the Symbiocene

This piece explores notions within Powers' novel *The Overstory*, particularly focusing on the rising threat of extinction that is a direct result of destructive anthropocentric ideologies such as plant blindness. These notions are propelled above and beyond the common dialectical process when paired with Rose's ideas found within her philosophy of ecological existentialism. The application of Rose's ideas in action takes *The Overstory* to new heights as readers are imbued with harsh philosophical questions that explore the connection between humankind and nature. The overall danger of denialism is accentuated by the investigation into the term de-extinction, calling for society to reject agreement as a form of truth, as it halts expansion mentally and physically, creating an even stronger disconnect. Bostrom's qualitative exploration of existential risks articulates the increasingly high threat extinction poses over society, and Schusslers and Wandersee's plant blindness completely destabilises the way in which individuals perceive the natural world. Morton's theory of hyperobjects is one example of an individual looking to expand above and beyond. All notions prevalent

call for a further embracement of the unstable uncertainty of Earth, rejecting the search for “order, certainty and predictability,”⁵⁶ ultimately resulting in a greater kinship of connectivity, in which individuals and society place themselves within nature and never separate to it...allowing us to move from the Anthropocene to a more hopeful, uncertain, Symbiocene.

“When is the best time to plant a tree?”

“Twenty years ago.”

“When is the next best time?”

“Now.”⁵⁷

After a brief but revelatory conversation with Gaia, he returned to his home, with building materials and plans and tools waiting for him. He looked at his wooden desk and chair. He saw their previous life, a life of freedom and of dancing.

He did not waste any time, he got straight back into writing his paper. He couldn't start without a title.

How about 'Home Repair'?

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56 Rose, D. B. (2013). *Wild dog dreaming*

57 Powers, R. (2018). *The Overstory*

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