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War and Peace in the Anthropocene

The Scale of Realism in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*

While Amitav Ghosh and others have argued that the conventions of the realist novel inhibit its capacity to represent the climate crisis, this essay argues that a Lukácsian approach to realism attentive to its historicizing ambitions can help us to better theorize how realism might confront the scalar logic of the Anthropocene. It shows how Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) picks up the historical strain of realism developed by Scott, Tolstoy, and Eliot, but extends its scale to situate human life within arboreal and evolutionary timescales. As the novel historicizes environmental consciousness against the forces of globalization and capitalism, it figures the contradictions and discontinuities in understanding that emerge as one tries to think simultaneously across these different scales. Although the novel cannot overcome these discontinuities, its capacity to help us imagine inhabiting these multiple, incommensurable scales highlights the continued relevance of the realist mode within the context of the Anthropocene.

> "And then it is another day and another, but I will not go on about this because no doubt you too have experienced time."
>
> *Weather* (Offill 2020, 186)

> "But people have no idea what time is. They think it's a line, spinning out from three seconds behind them, then vanishing just as fast into the three seconds of fog just ahead. They can't see that time is one spreading ring wrapped around another, outward and outward until the thinnest skin of *Now* depends for its being on the enormous mass of everything that has already died."
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> *The Overstory* (Powers 2018, 446)

1. Scale and the Anthropocene

As scholars have built upon the foundations of ecocriticism to engage more directly with the implications of anthropogenic climate change in the past decades, the term *scale* has come to define the central challenges the climate crisis presents to the literary and cultural imagination. Whether discussing the temporality, causality, or even ontology of the climate crisis, scholars across a range of disciplines have highlighted how the Anthropocene necessitates new ways of addressing problems of scale.[1] Migrating from its conceptual home in the field of geography, scale has been used in ecocriticism to describe a level of spatial or temporal generality at which particular phenomena, effects, and relationships can be observed or analyzed.[2] For Timothy Clark (2015, 22), the "most difficult challenge for critical reevaluations in the Anthropocene is represented by scale effects, that is, phenomena that are invisible at the normal levels of perception

but only emerge as one changes the spatial or temporal scale at which the issues are framed." As Amitav Ghosh (2016, 26) argues in *The Great Derangement* – which offers one point of departure for this special issue – the "deliberately prosaic world[s] of serious prose fiction" struggle to confront the challenges of the Anthropocene because of the conventions that shape the construction of those narrative worlds. Ghosh identifies the "scalar" "resistance" (ibid., 63) the Anthropocene presents to some of the central formal features that define the modern novel, from its emphasis on the "everyday" (ibid., 17) and "individual moral adventure" (ibid., 77), to its exclusion of "nonhuman agency" (ibid., 64) and reliance upon settings that become "self-contained ecosystem[s]" (ibid., 61) detached from larger forces or longer temporal spans. According to Ghosh, however, the origins of this problem can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, insofar as the conventions of contemporary literary fiction "derive ultimately from the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth" (ibid., 7). Within Ghosh's account, then, the idea of realism can be seen to characterize the crisis of the Anthropocene insofar as it embodies a set of conventions and beliefs about the world that fostered attitudes and activities that fueled anthropogenic climate change yet simultaneously make it "unthinkable" (ibid., 56).

While Ghosh and critics such as Ursula K. Heise (2019) have suggested that the conventions of science fiction are better equipped for the scale of the Anthropocene, this essay makes the case for the importance of realism as both a mode and critical tool for engaging these problems of scale. It does so by arguing that Ghosh's emphasis on the modern novel's links to the constitution of the "everyday" overlooks an important strain of the realist tradition that operates across different, more expansive scales. I turn to Richard Powers's 2018 novel *The Overstory* to show how it both self-consciously inherits this realist tradition and leverages it to confront the problems of scale that define the Anthropocene. Whereas Ghosh's account draws on theories of the novel that link realism to the production of a regularized and rationalized "everyday" (Moretti 2006), other approaches to realism have foregrounded its historical and historicizing foundations. In particular, the works of Georg Lukács offer another framework for understanding realism, one that sees the conventions of the nineteenth-century realist novel as defined by a "historical attitude to life" first codified in the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott (Lukács 1962 [1937], 47). The modern novel's capacity to grasp history as a process is linked to its operations at scales that exceed the everyday, scales that in fact defamiliarize and historicize it. Thus, while recent novels such as Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020) or Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019) might be seen to confront the challenges of representing the climate crisis in the fabric of everyday life, Powers's novel works to reorient the reader's perception or conception of the everyday – of the "*Now*" – but does so in a manner indebted to and in dialogue with the realist tradition.

As my title suggests, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) provides a famous point of reference in the realist tradition for understanding the formal dynamics

of *The Overstory*, as Tolstoy's novel supplements its depiction of the individual lives of its cast of characters with its notorious reflections on the movement of history. If *The Overstory* draws upon the kind of historical attitude embodied in the works of Tolstoy and Scott (and George Eliot, among others), it obviously extends their scalar ambitions by reframing human life within arboreal and evolutionary timescales. However, Tolstoy's novel is important not just because it helps us to see how realism has worked at scales beyond the everyday, but also because it reveals how contradictions and discontinuities emerge in the effort to represent these different scales. Although Ghosh and critics such as Adam Trexler have emphasized that "climate criticism must develop ways to describe this interpenetration between domestic and planetary scales" to address the "disproportionate scale effects" of the climate crisis (Trexler 2015, 26), the Anthropocene is also defined by the fact that there are "disjunctures and incommensurable differences among scales" (Woods 2014, 135). As *The Overstory* works at multiple scales in its effort to historicize ecological consciousness, it makes felt the contradictions and discontinuities that emerge when questions of agency, violence, and life itself in the Anthropocene are encountered at different scales. In arguing for the continued relevance of realism for narrative theory (and practice) in the Anthropocene, then, this essay not only wants to insist on a more diverse understanding of the scalar logics of the novel that get occluded when realism is restricted to ideas of the everyday, but also to explore the possible affordances of literary fiction in the Anthropocene beyond the urgent political and ethical questions that confront us as individuals and as a species.

2. The Scale of Realism

Realism's diminished status in discussions of climate change is a result of the way the Anthropocene "blurs and even scrambles some crucial categories by which people have made sense of the world and their lives" (Clark 2015, 9). By inscribing human agency into the geological history of the planet, the term Anthropocene designates the human species as a geologic force and in the process disrupts the foundations of many disciplinary modes of thought by dismantling the boundary between human history and the geological history of the planet. On the one hand, this recognition means that human activity can no longer be assessed as something distinct from or independent of the 'environment' that is a mere backdrop or setting for that activity. And on the other hand, this recognition unsettles the centrality of the individual subject – which has been the foundation of Western forms of social and political thought – by identifying how humanity becomes a geological force only at a particular scale, through collective activity and over time. The very notion of the Anthropocene – whether the term itself or its point of origin – has been the subject of important debates that have scrutinized the way the term occludes histories of capitalism, colonialism, and globalization by subsuming human activity beneath a universalizing *anthropos*.[3]

Yet regardless of how we ultimately name and date the period in question, the problems of reconceiving human activity in relation to the natural world and at scale remain.

Ghosh diagnoses the specific challenges these problems present for the modern novel by tracing the continuities between the conventions that underpin the construction of novelistic worlds and the cultural assumptions about humanity's place in the world that gave rise to carbon-dependent industrial society. According to Ghosh (2016, 66), the "literary imagination became radically centered on the human" in the nineteenth century. In the same period, the triumph of gradualist theories of geological change emphasized the stability of the environment, and frequentist theories of probability construed society as an entity defined by its statistical, aggregate regularity. For Ghosh (ibid., 19), the "everyday life" that becomes the foundation of the novel's mimetic aspirations is one in which human activity is foregrounded in an environment that is seen as independent and stable. Other critics have made this same argument with different points of emphasis. For example, although Jesse Oak Taylor (2018, 116) productively queries Ghosh's skepticism about "cli fi" by exploring how genres outside the ambit of "serious fiction" might offer more adequate modes for storytelling in the Anthropocene, he does so by more explicitly demarcating the limits of realism. In particular, he returns to influential accounts of the novel like Ian Watt's to draw out the ways in which the stable environments imagined by the realist novel necessitated "a form of inattention" to the processes of "rapid industrialization, urbanization, enclosure, deforestation, acceleration, and globalization" that actually produced everyday life (ibid., 113). As he succinctly puts it:

> Realism's dependence on, and construction of, the environment as an inherently stable category is arguably what makes it useful for thinking about the modes of being that have led us into the Anthropocene. However, that very fact may also limit its usefulness in finding our way out again (ibid., 116).

My intention here is not to challenge these accounts of the history of the novel, nor to downplay the important work Taylor and others have done to identify and analyze the affordances of various "Anthropocene genres" (LeMenager 2017, 220). Instead, I simply want to suggest that, in these accounts, realism acquires a very limited meaning, so that 'realism' names a certain problem but begins to lose touch with the works or tradition it purports to describe. As already suggested above, the writings of Georg Lukács, particularly his work *The Historical Novel* (1937), offer another view of the realist tradition that foregrounds its capacity to represent "how important historical changes affect everyday life" (Lukács 1962 [1937], 49). While the eighteenth-century novel offered a "realistic portrayal of the present" that grasped the "historical peculiarity" of characters and events (ibid., 20), the historicism that arose in the wake of the French Revolution gave rise to a more concrete awareness of history as a process. It was this "awareness of historical development" (ibid., 32) that Sir Walter Scott – according to Lukács – brought to the realist tradition he inherited and that enabled him to present "the inter-relationships between the psychology of people and the economic and moral circumstances of their lives" through "a very broad portrayal of these circumstances and interactions" (ibid., 40). Scott's mode of

realism is not only historical, then, in the basic sense that it represents past ages and societies, but also in the much more robust sense that it captures the "peculiarity of different historical periods" (ibid., 45). At its most ambitious, this historicizing impulse of realism renders the specificity of distinct periods and cultures not as the "'authenticity of local colour'" but as the "portrayal of the broad living basis of historical events in their intricacy and complexity, in their manifold interaction with acting individuals" (ibid., 43).

In his comment here about the "the broad living basis of historical events," Lukács is referring to the material and social forces that shape the contours of a given historical moment, and not to the basis of biological life that those forces ultimately rely upon. However, it nevertheless invites and supports an ecological perspective by challenging the argument that the "grid of literary forms and conventions" (Ghosh 2016, 7) associated with realism can be reduced to an exclusive focus on the regularity of everyday life. The historical essays in *War and Peace*, Scott's "A Postscript, Which Should Have Been a Preface" to *Waverley* (1814), and the Prelude and Finale of Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) offer prominent examples of the way in which the realist novel extends its scale to historicize the "everyday life" they represent. *Middlemarch* is a useful example, because if it is a novel that – as Moretti (2006, 279) claims – is "a great collection of fillers," it is also a historical novel. Although the novel's Prelude gestures toward transhistorical "kind[s]" among "the varying experiments of Time" (Eliot 2008, 3), Eliot's realism is – as Griffiths (2016, 182) argues – defined by a "comparatism" that rejects transhistorical knowledge and instead commits itself to searching for analogies and harmonies between historical moments. Although none of these novels present "forces of unthinkable magnitude that create unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space" (Ghosh 2016, 63), they nevertheless challenge the notion that the realist tradition is defined by a restriction to the "delimited horizon" of everyday bourgeois life (ibid., 61).

If the essayistic reflections of *War and Peace* or postscripts and preludes to novels like *Middlemarch* and *Waverley* embody the least literary, non-narrative elements of their respective novels, they also highlight the tensions that emerge as realism attempts to capture both the particularity of individual lives and the "broad living basis" of the socio-historical worlds in which those lives are embedded. Lukács (1962 [1937], 43) suggests that Tolstoy ultimately "abandons himself to historico-philosophical effusions" in *War and Peace* because there was no "literary surrogate" for his efforts to "deal with comprehensive political and strategic problems of the war." In other words, Tolstoy is elsewhere able to select specific "episodes from the war" to indicate the "human development of his main characters" and also give "vivid expression" to the whole of the Russian army and populace, yet at a certain level of abstraction there is no "literary surrogate" for the material he aims to embody. In fact, this tension is more pronounced than Lukács allows, as his Hegelian framework and commitment to the concept of totality lead him to embrace the idea that 'typical' characters can reconcile the conflict between particularity and universality. Harry E. Shaw (1983, 31) instead identifies this tension as the "problem" with historical fiction: that it

cannot represent all levels of generality at which humans exist, and that there is a limit to "how much of the scale a literary work can represent." Shaw maintains a Lukácsian faith in the capacity of the novel to grasp the contours of human existence in history, but places limits on Lukács's notion that the 'typical' character can at once give expression to the intricacies of human interiority and simultaneously connect those experiences to the material foundations of their cultural milieu. As Shaw explains:

> I do not mean to deny Lukács's assertion that the great achievement of nineteenth-century realism was to enable prose fiction to encompass a broader segment of the scale of human existence than it had included before or has since. But there are limits to this achievement. If what we require is active representation, I think we are bound to conclude that even in the greatest realist fiction, characters cannot represent all levels of human existence at once. (1983, 45)

In short, if the "historical attitude to life" (Lukács 1962 [1937], 47) embodied by certain realist novels entails an effort to historicize the everyday of particular societies or cultures by extending the scale of representation to incorporate the foundations of that everyday life, there are nevertheless limits to their capacity to represent the interpenetration of those different scales.

Elsewhere (Grener 2020), I have traced how the recognition of this representational problem can be understood to have emerged historically over the course of the nineteenth century as statistical notions of probability placed pressure on how these different scales of reality were conceived: as probability came to be understood in terms of statistical ideas of aggregate regularity, it came to embody a paradoxical imperative for realist representation because it was at odds with a commitment to concrete particularity. Here, I want to suggest that the scalar challenges of the Anthropocene are not categorically distinct but rather an extension of this problem. Although it would be a mistake to interpret Lukács's local comment about "the broad living basis of historical events" in biological (or geological) terms, it would also be shortsighted to dismiss realism's capacity to extend to such scales out of hand. Indeed, Gillian Beer's important study of the influence of Darwinian evolutionary theory on the Victorian novel illustrates how late nineteenth-century realism incorporated such perspectives. In particular, her analysis of how "the problem of finding a scale for the human" (Beer 1983, 249) becomes a central feature of Thomas Hardy's novels highlights the contradictions that emerge as attention to the individual life is coupled with an awareness of evolutionary spans:

> In reading Hardy's work we often find a triple level of plot generated: the anxiously scheming and predictive plot of the characters' making; the optative plot of the commentary, [...] and the absolute plot of blind interaction and 'Nature's laws'. These laws cannot be comprehended within a single order. In Hardy's novels all scales are absolute, but multiple. (Ibid., 240)

As Beer shows, Hardy's works register the paradoxes that attend the recognition of life across these multiple, incommensurable scales: his novels at once assert "people's independence and self-assertion" while simultaneously emphasizing how those "recuperative energies" participate in larger processes, including the continuation of the species (ibid.).[4]

It is these same contradictions and paradoxes that define the scales of the Anthropocene. As Morgan (2019, 46f.) notes, one of the fundamental challenges of the Anthropocene is that we must "find ways to understand human action as inhabiting, simultaneously, incommensurate scales." The challenge is not simply one of finding the appropriate scale of analysis for understanding particular problems or phenomena; it also requires acknowledging that different scales cannot necessarily be translated or brought into relation with each other. Political ecologists, for example, have used the idea of "scale independence" to identify the ways in which the "extrapolation of a phenomenon across an order or range of spatiotemporal categories will not necessarily yield generalized truths about causes, behaviour, effects, and outcomes" (Rangan and Kull 2008, 41). Derek Woods (2014, 133) has analyzed this same idea under the name of "scale variance" to highlight the importance of "scale critique" in the Anthropocene. For Woods, scale critique not only forces us to acknowledge the discontinuities across scales but to query the subject of the Anthropocene itself. While the term designates the human species as an agent of geological force, Woods suggests that the "subject of the Anthropocene is not an individual or species-based 'intelligence' that, without mutation, projects across scales to shape the matter of the Earth" (ibid., 138), but rather "modern terraforming assemblages" that force us to come to terms with the disempowerment of the species. The challenge of the Anthropocene, then, is not just to conceive human activity across multiple, discontinuous scales, but also to understand how that activity works in concert with other types of agency, other forms of life. The former, I am arguing, has been important to a strain of the realist tradition since the nineteenth century, while contemporary novels like *The Overstory* writing within that tradition are attempting to address the latter.

3. Historicizing Ecological Consciousness

The epigraphs at the start of this essay present two drastically different notions of time and the everyday: while Jenny Offill's *Weather* takes as given a shared or communal understanding of human experience within time that some might see as the primary medium of the modern novel, *The Overstory* works to radically alter or reorient its reader's sense of time. It does so through various motifs and formal structures that unravel the givenness of the everyday, from the gripping opening image of the Hoel chestnut tree, photographed at monthly intervals by members of the Hoel family for decades to create a gigantic flip-book of its growth and seasons, to the introduction of its closing section "Seeds," where "*the planet is born at midnight and it runs for one day*" (Powers 2018, 591, emphasis original), and "*modern man shows up four seconds before midnight*" (ibid., 592, emphasis original). These mechanisms are clearly integral to the novel's engagement with questions of ecological consciousness and environmental activism. *The Overstory* is, as early reviewers noted, a novel clearly "driven by ideas" (Markovits

2018, n.p.), perhaps to its own detriment. Although the novel has been enthusiastically received and has won awards including the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, some critics have found its ideological ambitions overbearing and claimed that "it works by browbeating the reader with lectures and daft melodrama" (Jordison 2018, n.p.). Yet our perspective on the ultimate import of its ideas – or the nature of its browbeating – is considerably different if we see the novel as working within the realist tradition outlined above. Although the novel seems to speak directly to the unfolding climate crisis – and seems to want to urge its readers to action or to cultivate particular forms of awareness – it can also be read within the tradition of the historical novel discussed above. Whereas Jonathan Arac (2020, 139) has compared Powers to Melville and Pynchon and placed the novel within the contested lineage of "the great American novel," here I consider what it means to read *The Overstory* within the parameters of realist scale and the tradition of the nineteenth-century historical novel.[5]

One of the primary aims of *The Overstory*'s ecological concerns is to cultivate the "sense of recognition" that Ghosh (2016, 30) discusses in *The Great Derangement*: "an awareness that humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctively our own." It is these forms of recognition that the "habits of thought" (ibid., 31) which gave rise to the climate crisis struggle to accommodate. *The Overstory* works to incorporate this recognition of the non-human into the realist imagination through a persistent interrogation and defamiliarization of these habits of thought.[6] While the plot of the novel is structured around its nine main characters, most of whose lives converge in some form or another around protests to preserve old-growth redwood forests in northern California, these characters' storylines draw upon different disciplinary or scientific perspectives that call into question the commonsense notions that underpin human exceptionalism and derive from the "cultural matrix" that Ghosh (ibid., 10) suggests gave rise to the realist novel. This tactic is most obvious and explicit in the case of Dr. Patricia Westerford, the dendrologist whose early research on tree communication and sociability is initially received warmly – "her data are sound and no one can find any problems except common sense" (Powers 2018, 158) – but whose views are quickly rejected and ostracized by the established scientific consensus.

This questioning of common sense – and thus the notions underlying realism's verisimilitude – occurs repeatedly throughout most of the other storylines in the novel. In the case of Adam Appich, the lens of behavioral psychology becomes a means of exploring how humans "carry around legacy behaviors and biases" (ibid., 76) of our evolutionary past which function to keep humans "blissfully ignorant of who we are" and "operating in a dense fog of mutual reinforcement" (ibid., 291). In a similar vein, Ray Brinkman's work as an intellectual property lawyer leads to the exploration of arguments that call into question the fundamental premises of the law by exploring whether rights should be extended to trees: this is a proposal that is "*bound to sound odd or frightening or laughable [...] because until the rightless thing receives its rights, we cannot see it as anything but a thing for*

the use of 'us'" (ibid., 313, emphasis original). Perhaps the most interesting example – which I discuss in more detail below – is that of Neelay Mehta, the wheelchair-bound computer programmer whose world-building games are defined by their "unbelievable verisimilitude" (ibid., 240). Beginning with his childhood engagement with digital worlds in the early days of computer technology, Neelay strives to create game-worlds that iteratively and increasingly "capture the richness and complexity of the real deals" (ibid., 516). Through all of these perspectives then, *The Overstory* defamiliarizes the stability of 'the real' or 'the environment' by highlighting how both are human constructions, both in a conceptual and a literal sense.

The Overstory is by no means the only novel that performs this work of defamiliarizing the everyday in an attempt to address some of the cultural and imaginative assumptions that have led us into the Anthropocene. Indeed, Ghosh's most recent novel, *Gun Island* (2019), seems in large part an effort to redress some of the shortcomings of literary fiction in the Anthropocene that he had diagnosed in *The Great Derangement*. The novel follows the narrator Dinanath (or Deen) Datta – a rare book dealer – as he tries to unravel the historical origins of the mysterious legend of the Gun Merchant, in the process traveling from the Sundarbans, to New York and Los Angeles, and ultimately to Venice. Deen's journeys (and the novel's plot) are punctuated by a series of marvelous coincidences and correspondences – between his personal past and his present inquiries; between the seventeenth-century legend of a merchant enslaved and transported from Bengal to Egypt and then to Europe and contemporary waves of migrants and refugees moving from the subcontinent across the Middle East; and between the "severe climatic disruption[s]" (Ghosh 2019, 135) of that earlier period and the current climate crisis. Many of the strange coincidences Deen encounters involve animals, and are uncanny because they entail the environment behaving in ways outside of its normal patterns or expected regularities: dolphins beaching themselves for unknown reasons, snakes and spiders appearing outside of their prior habitats, and so on. While these experiences stir superstitious imaginings in Deen, the novel is also at pains to explain (and Deen to acknowledge) that these seemingly bizarre encounters (and the novel's various natural and weather disasters) can be accounted for by climate change. As Deen explains to his friend Cinta at one point following a particularly unsettling and unprecedented encounter with a venomous spider in her Venetian apartment: "You know – temperatures are rising around the world because of global warming. This means that the habitats of various kinds of animals are also changing. The brown recluse spider is extending its range into places where it wasn't found before – like this part of Italy" (ibid., 234).

Gun Island is a novel that operates in the register of what Ghosh (2016, 32) in *The Great Derangement* calls the "environmental uncanny." This term expresses the "strangeness" of the changes happening "not merely in the sense of being unknown or alien" but also "in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors" (ibid., 31). Although the environmental uncanny

evokes many of the same effects as the supernatural, it differs precisely in the way that things like extreme weather events or strange encounters with nonhuman life become "animated by cumulative human actions" (ibid., 32). By interrogating and challenging the philosophical and cultural assumptions that have created rigid boundaries between human and nonhuman forms of agency, the environmental uncanny facilitates what Cinta at one point calls "a *risveglio*, a kind of awakening" that disrupts our inertia, our tendency to "go about our daily business through habit, as though we were in the grip of forces that have overwhelmed our will" (Ghosh 2019, 237). In this way, then, *Gun Island* works within the conventions of realist fiction but does so to unsettle and disrupt those conventions in order to make climate change 'thinkable' within their parameters.

The Overstory also seems to make use of the forms of awakening or recognition prompted by the environmental uncanny. The experiences of Olivia Vandergriff present the novel's most sustained engagement with the environmental uncanny and illustrate how such "interven[tions]" (Ghosh 2016, 31) of the nonhuman potentially threaten the foundations of realism. Olivia is the college student whose electrocution, momentary death, and subsequent reawakening are accompanied by a newfound awareness of "presences" (Powers 2018, 196) that lead her to the protests in California and drive the novel's plot of environmental activism. In her near-death experience, Olivia "realizes that *being alone* is a contradiction in terms," since "even in a body's most private moments, something else joins us" (ibid., 196, emphasis original). As Olivia begins her journey west and unites with Nicholas Hoel, her feelings and sensibilities are repeatedly examined under the idea of being "*crazy*" (ibid., 216, emphasis original). The fact that she is hearing voices and feeling guided by presences raises questions about her sanity, but the novel leverages this term as an assault on common sense, the same common sense that dismisses Patricia's research on the sociability of trees. As Olivia explains to Nick soon after they meet: "I don't feel crazy. That's the weird thing. I was crazy *before*. I know what crazy feels like. This all feels... I don't know. Like I'm finally seeing the obvious" (ibid., 221, emphasis original). Ultimately, Olivia's interactions with these "nonhuman interlocutors" (Ghosh 2016, 30) are never fully explained by the novel: they could be the product of delusion or injury ("She thinks: *Maybe I have brain damage*"; Powers 2018, 196), some not-yet-understood scientific phenomenon, or supernatural (or paranormal) activity. While this ambiguity might be perceived as a deviation from the novel's realist framework, it contributes to the novel's efforts to expose and rewrite the limits of rational credulity. Olivia's new sense of what is obvious draws Nick and Adam Appich into their activism and the subsequent ecotage that results in Olivia's death. Although Adam initially joins Olivia and Nick on Mimas – the giant redwood that they have inhabited to prevent it from being logged – as part of his psychological research on "misguided idealism" (ibid., 396) and "paranoid salvationism" (ibid., 398), once they are eventually forced back to earth and arrested "he has begun to see certain things about faith and law that hid themselves behind the expanse of common sense" (ibid., 410). Like *Gun Island*, then, *The*

Overstory destabilizes and dismantles the rationalist assumptions that have led humanity into the climate crisis.

Yet *The Overstory*'s engagement with these forms of awareness or recognition extend well beyond the environmental uncanny, most notably in the way that the novel takes up their ethical and political implications. It is, of course, Olivia's "craziness" that becomes the driving force of the group's acts of protest and then ecotage, and which comes under new and more intense forms of scrutiny once her companions must come to terms with her death and their actions. But here is where careful attention should be given to the novel's historical dimension and the temporal displacement of the diegesis from the present. As noted above, the novel is one that clearly speaks to the context of its publication and to a set of concerns that have become more pressing (or pressing in new ways) over the past decade as the so-called Anthropocene has become more widely acknowledged and accepted. Although the action of the novel extends into the near-present, the core of its action is set in the early 1990s and the 'Redwood Summer' which it fictionalizes.[7] *The Overstory* not only takes up these historical events but more importantly details the historical milieu in which they took place: the forces of industrialization and capitalism that elicit the protests are depicted in selective but specific detail. Olivia's "sense of recognition" is not only particularized in specific ways, but it is also historicized as the product of a delineated cultural moment. *The Overstory,* in other words, operates in the robust historical sense discussed above, exploring "the inter-relationships between the psychology of people and the economic and moral circumstances of their lives" (Lukács 1962, 40).

Foregrounding *The Overstory*'s historicizing impulse helps us to better understand the way it uses this distance between the present of its publication and its primary setting as the foundation for its much more radical extensions of temporal scale. At its most ambitious, the novel works to situate human existence – as individuals and as a species – within the grandiose scales of the history of the planet and the evolutionary development of biological life. But it reaches for these scales through more distinct gradations. These are established in its opening section "Roots," and in particular the first two sections centered around Nicholas Hoel and Mimi Ma. Both sections span multiple generations and, more importantly, trace important patterns of migration – Jørgen Hoel arriving in America from Norway in the mid-nineteenth century, and Mimi's father, Ma Sih Hsuin, arriving from China in the mid-twentieth. These biographies provide metonymical links to the structures of modernity, capitalism, and globalization that underpin the mechanisms of environmental degradation that come into sharper focus in the following section, "Trunk." And moving forward, the third section of the novel, "Crown," includes brief but incisive representations of three key moments that define the expansion of and resistance to capitalism in the past decades: the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement of 2011. Each of these moments helps to heighten the sense of urgency surrounding the novel's ecological concerns. And yet while the

novel's anti-capitalism is overt, my sense is that it is less interested in 'browbeating its readers with lectures' than it is in cultivating an awareness of the historical dimension of ecological consciousness. In situating the war between capitalism and the life of the planet in specific historical contexts, *The Overstory* reminds its readers that specific forms of ecological awareness have a history and are embedded within the histories of life on the planet.

Ultimately, then, *The Overstory* evinces a keen awareness of its own historicity – of its participation in the story of "what life has come to know about itself" (Powers 2018, 159). This awareness is also tied to that of its participation in the history of the novel. Alongside the novel's many literary allusions – with those to Ovid and realists like Tolstoy being prominent – Neelay's storyline reflects self-consciously on the evolution of mimetic conventions as well as on human forms of world-making. The earliest versions of Neelay's game *Mastery* are "pathetic": the world is "two-dimensional – no smell, no touch, no taste, no feel. It's tiny and grainy, with a world model as simplistic as Genesis" (ibid., 282). Nevertheless, the game presents its players with "almost as many meaningful choices as Real Life" (ibid.), and is so engrossing and successful that people wonder if it is "changing the brains of the people who play it" (ibid., 283). Subsequent releases of *Mastery* not only present increased verisimilitude through enhanced graphics but also include new technologies and resources that are both a product and reflection of "the spent, filled-up cities of the industrialized planet [that] have willed this thing [the game] into being" (ibid., 345). Although the graphics and logistics of the game develop "*more realism*" (ibid., 346, emphasis original) to the point where it becomes a "land of animated wishes" that can be "fill[ed] with richer, wilder, more surprising life beyond life" (ibid., 385), Neelay also comes to recognize that the game is "rotten at its core" because it is driven by "[e]ndless, pointless prosperity" (ibid., 512). Neelay's solution is to incorporate greater verisimilitude of the world itself – an "atmosphere," "water quality," "nutrient cycles," "finite material resources" (ibid., 515). These developments would "capture the richness and complexity of the real deals" and in the process impose limits on players, forcing them to "learn what the world will bear, how life really works" (ibid., 516). Although Neelay's ambitions are unanimously vetoed by his team of project managers who have profited by the game's success – a point I will return to below – the evolution of his virtual worlds suggest that mimetic conventions can themselves become "complex adaptive systems" (ibid., 517) with the capacity to help us inhabit the world they reflect in new ways.

The evolution of *Mastery* thus foregrounds the dialectical, dynamic nature of mimetic conventions. Whereas Ghosh suggests that the modern novel persists within a seemingly stable "grid of literary forms and conventions," theorists of realism from Lukács (1962 [1937]) and Auerbach (1974 [1953]) to Levine (1981) and Jameson (2013) have characterized realism as inherently revisionist in nature. In her reading of *The Overstory*, Birgit Spengler (2019, 83) argues that the novel "remains indebted to realist and human-centered conventions of representing time and space," but juxtaposes this realist chronotope with an arboreal chronotope in order to reconceptualize humanity's "relationship to the nonhuman and

more-than-human world." This process, however, might also be seen as a revision of the realist chronotope itself. In Jonathan Culler's (1975) account, verisimilitude (*vraisemblance*) is produced – and texts are made intelligible – through the interplay of basic knowledge, cultural beliefs or attitudes, and representational or generic conventions. By defamiliarizing the beliefs and attitudes that underwrite human exceptionalism, *The Overstory* works to redefine and naturalize the status of the nonhuman *within* the real. Neelay's game, after all, does not just present its players with a version of "Real Life" (Powers 2018, 82) but in fact "changes the[ir] brains" (ibid., 83) in the process.

4. Inhabiting the Scales of the Anthropocene

If *The Overstory* is a novel that endeavors to extend the temporal and representational scales of realism in order to confront the Anthropocene, it is also one that foregrounds the central role stories play in shaping the way we inhabit the world. The novel repeatedly draws attention to the importance of myth in shaping individual and cultural identities, and appears to initiate a process of returning humanity to its fundamental myths as a means of revisiting and revising the beliefs that led the human species into separating itself from the rest of the planet's biomass.[8] This is most readily apparent in the frequent invocations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which figure centrally in Patricia Westerford's storyline. The opening line of the *Metamorphoses* – "*Let me sing to you now, about how people turn into other things*" (Powers 2018, 147, emphasis original) – becomes a mantra running through the novel that asserts the power of stories *about* change to *create* change. If, as Ghosh and Taylor suggest, the conventions of the modern novel reflect and reinforce the habits of mind that have led us into the Anthropocene, *The Overstory* appears to claim a special place for narrative in potentially altering the current trajectory of life on the planet. As Olivia tells Adam when he joins them in the Free Bioregion of Cascadia: "The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story" (ibid., 420).

Yet as *The Overstory* extends the scale of realist representation to situate human life within its arboreal and evolutionary timescales, it also exposes the discontinuities and paradoxes that emerge when those different scales are brought together. Again and again, the novel presents instances where an individual's moment of awareness or recognition cannot be fully translated or assimilated into their lived experience of culture. Although Nick Hoel "feels himself becoming another species" (ibid., 332) as he inhabits Mimas with Olivia, his inability to come to terms with Olivia's death excludes him from any kind of meaningful social existence. Similarly, as Douglas Pavlicek wrestles with the fallout of their ecotage in the woods of Montana, he comes to see the incommensurability of evolutionary awareness and social being:

> The pen moves; the ideas form, as if by spirit hand. Something shines out, a truth so self-evident that the words dictate themselves. We're cashing in a billion years of planetary savings bonds and blowing it on assorted bling. And what Douglas Pavlicek wants to know is why this is so easy to see when you're by yourself in a cabin on a hillside, and almost impossible to believe once you step out of the house and join several billion folks doubling down on the status quo. (Ibid., 482)

The reasons for this incommensurability, as Ray Brinkman comes to discover, are intimately tied to the difficulty of representing the different scales of human existence. Following his stroke Ray avidly devours fiction, "hang[ing] on the most ridiculous plot crumb, as if the future of humanity hinges on it" (ibid., 477). However, as Dorothy reads through classic novels with him, he comes to see that what these novels share at their "core" is the idea that character "is all that matters in the end." This is followed by the assertion that "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" (ibid., 477f., emphasis original). The novel's inclusion of the iconic scene from *War and Peace* of Prince Andrei's near-death on the battlefield of Austerlitz figures the limits both novels confront in bringing together their different scales: "The hero lies wondering how he could have missed the central truth of existence until that moment: the whole world and all the hearts of men are as nothing, lined up underneath the infinite blue" (ibid., 464). The more the novel pushes toward the scales of evolutionary development, the more the individual lives it depicts appear "as nothing."

The recognition of these discontinuities of scale is made explicit in isolated moments like these, but it is also something cultivated in a more thoroughgoing way by the novel's form. The novel, in other words, offers an invitation to view life at these different scales, but also exposes the ways in which meaning at these competing scales cannot be reconciled. If, as I suggested above, the novel extends its engagement with questions of ecological awareness into an exploration of its ethical and political implications, it highlights the contradictory or paradoxical nature of those implications within these different scales. The acts of ecotage committed by the group of five characters are, of course, at the core of the novel. Although the characters who survive all come to see their actions as misguided at best, the novel as a whole develops a complex attitude towards these acts that cannot be reduced to a binary of endorsement or repudiation. The conversation between Adam and Douglas in the context of the Occupy protests – a conversation staged by the FBI to elicit a confession from Adam – illuminates the central paradoxes the novel confronts. As Douglas invites Adam to revisit their decisions, the "taboo" "questions of rogue philosophers" return to Adam's head: "How many trees equal one person? Can an impending catastrophe justify small, pointed violence?" (ibid., 539). While these ethical questions are posed in a consequentialist manner here, the novel as a whole compels readers to ponder them from a historical point of view and in the context of its incommensurable scales. The second section of the novel opens with a proleptic portrait of Adam in his prison cell, tracing the grains in his wooden desktop and attempting to "*translate*" and "*decode the vast projects that the soil organized*" and to put them in human terms (ibid., 193, emphasis original). This image captures the way

in which meaning at the scale of those vast projects cannot be neatly or even meaningfully translated into the scale of the individual's life.

Thus, while *The Overstory* is a novel that situates human existence within arboreal and evolutionary timescales, it is – like Neelay's franchise – a narrative "thought game" (ibid., 284) that makes felt the contradictions that emerge in the attempt to translate between such scales. Like the novels in the realist tradition it inherits from the nineteenth century, *The Overstory* traces the unfolding of individual lives within the broader trajectory of history, extending its field of vision out toward the arc of life on this planet. As it does so, it offers a kind of double-vision capable of inhibiting such contradictions between scales. As I read it, *The Overstory* appears pessimistic about humankind's ability to alter the trajectory of capitalism and the driving forces behind the climate crisis.[9] Its scenes of resistance to these structures and "terraforming assemblages" (Woods 2014, 138) – environmental movements, the WHO protests, the Occupy movement – are all pointed failures in slowing, stopping, or diverting the forces of capitalism that are destroying "*the most wondrous products of four billion years of life*" (ibid., 205, emphasis original).[10] At a certain level of abstraction, actions at the scale of the individual appear powerless if not meaningless to alter that trajectory. Yet *The Overstory* is by no means nihilistic, as it generates a profound appreciation of the fragility and miraculousness of life, human and otherwise. The storylines of both Olivia and Patricia are, notably, plots of death and re-birth: Olivia reanimates after her electrocution only to die again in an act of violence, and Patricia contemplates suicide twice, only to choose "unsuicide" (ibid., 600) both times. The book Patricia goes on to write unites all of the characters, and in the process "changes the future," "even the future of trees" (ibid., 276). If, then, *The Overstory* conjures a future where the trajectory of environmental degradation continues unimpeded, it also highlights the infinite branching pathways life might take into a future that might, to an extent, be inescapable. It is able to do this, I have argued, by drawing on the affordances that accompany the realist novel's historical attitude to life. It is important for literary and narrative theorists to examine how the novel form participated in the historical processes that brought us into the Anthropocene, as well as how it might contribute to bringing about alternative or better futures. Perhaps more importantly, though, works like *The Overstory* also illustrate how novels – including realist ones – can be tools for learning how to inhabit the contradictions and paradoxes that accompany the scales of the Anthropocene.

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[1] For the challenge of representing the temporality of climate change, see Mertens / Craps (2018) and Nixon (2011). Morton's (2013) concept of the "hyperobject" has been influential for articulating the ontology of climate change.

[2] See Herod (2011) for an overview of how the meaning and use of the term has evolved in Geography.

[3] See Yusoff (2018).

[4] These issues of incommensurate scales in Hardy's novels have been taken up more recently by Morgan (2019) and Rosenberg (2019).

[5] This tradition appears explicitly in the novel itself through the classics like *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* that Dorothy reads to Ray following his stroke. Initially, Ray and Dorothy take to collecting and reading books as a means of compensating for their inability to have children and deteriorating marriage, but Ray comes to find fiction more compelling following his stroke. Alongside the prominent place of Tolstoy in their readings, Dorothy acquires "Walter Scott's *Complete Waverley Novels*" (Powers 2018, 261).

[6] As Meinen et al. (2019, 41) argue, a "discussion about interdisciplinary knowledge lies at the heart" of *The Overstory* as the novel continues Powers's engagement "with questions about the creation of knowledge and the status of art."

[7] For an account of the protests of the Redwood Summer led by Earth First!, see Shantz 2002.

[8] For an account of how plants came to be marginalized or excluded from systems of moral and ethical consideration, see Hall (2011, 2019).

[9] Foregrounding Neelay's epiphany and creation of an algorithm that matches the complexity of biological life, Caracciolo (2019, 48) argues that the novel's ending cultivates an affective ambivalence about the fate of humanity, as this "computational intervention" in the future of life on the planet is "hopeful from a biocentric perspective, because it promises the continuation of life on Earth despite the devastation caused by human activities."

[10] The novel also depicts the attacks of September 11th as a failure in this sense insofar as they fail to cultivate a sense of global awareness and interconnection that they might have. As Dorothy witnesses them on television, she reflects: "She has seen this before: monstrous

columns, too big to be felled, falling. She thinks: *Finally, the whole strange dream of* safety*, of* separation, *will die.* But when it comes to prediction, she has always been worse than wrong" (Powers 2018, 496, emphasis original).