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**“At the Speed of Trees”: Richard Powers’ *The Overstory***

**Abstract I:** Questo saggio utilizza il modello bioculturale di dominio-partnership di Riane Eisler come rilevante testimonianza del modo in cui un approccio transdisciplinare per lo studio della letteratura può ampliare la nostra visione critica, la nostra metodologia e comprensione nell’analisi di testi di diverse tipologie. Questa metodologia olistica di ampio spettro include diversi ambiti della conoscenza e dell’indagine critica, fra i quali la fisica quantistica, la biologia e la scienza sistemica, l’ecosofia, l’eco-letteratura, e gli studi contemporanei sulla vita delle piante. Fulcro del saggio è l’analisi del romanzo *The Overstory* (2018) di Richard Powers che si configura come denuncia veemente della visione del mondo di dominio, distruttiva e violenta, che vede la Terra come luogo da controllare e sfruttare, e al tempo stesso dà ampio spazio e rafforza le idee fondanti del paradigma culturale di *partnership*, di amore e cura di sé e del mondo.

**Abstract II:** This essay applies Riane Eisler’s biocultural partnership-dominator model as a relevant testimony of how transdisciplinary approaches to literature can broaden our critical scope, methodology and understanding when examining different types of texts. This comprehensive methodology for the study of literature draws upon different fields of knowledge and scientific investigation, such as quantum physics, biology and systemic science, ecosophy, ecoliteracy and contemporary studies on plant life. With the aim of rekindling the fundamental relationship between humans and nature, Richard Powers’ novel *The Overstory* (2018) is analysed as a powerful denunciation of the current dominator, destructive, violent world-view pervading our planet. If the Earth and its inhabitants are portrayed as being controlled and exploited, the novel also unmistakably reinforces the fundamental values of the partnership cultural paradigm, which focuses on the caring potential of human love and reciprocity.

**Keywords:** Powers’ *The Overstory*, biocultural partnership model, systemic science, plant life, myth, ecoliteracy.

### 1. Nature as our Partner

This essay is the result of research pursued by the Partnership Studies Group of Udine University<sup>1</sup> on Riane Eisler's biocultural partnership-dominator model (1987, 1995, Eisler & Fry 2019) as a relevant testimony of how transdisciplinary approaches to literature can broaden our critical scope, methodology and understanding when examining different types of 'texts'. I apply this holistic and comprehensive methodology for the study of literature, which draws upon different fields of knowledge and scientific investigation, such as quantum physics, biology and systemic science (Capra 1982, 1987, with Vikram 2018, with Luisi 2016), Panikkar's theories on *ecosophy* and *inter-independence* (Phan & Young 2018: 193, 273)<sup>2</sup>, and contemporary studies on plant life (Mancuso 2017a-b, 2018, 2019; Gagliano *et al.* 2017; Gagliano 2018) and ecoliteracy (Garrard 2004). Due to globalisation, exploitation and technological control exerted by multinationals, humanity has increasingly grown detached and alienated from nature, both in the sense of human nature and of the natural world.

With the aim of rekindling this fundamental relationship between humans and nature, I intend to analyse Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* (2018), winner of the Pulitzer prize in 2019 and the Von Rezzori prize in 2020, an epic Ovidian novel full of arboreal metamorphoses representing a powerful denunciation of the current dominator, destructive, violent world-view pervading our planet. At the same time, the book unmistakably reinforces the fundamental values of the *partnership* cultural paradigm, which focuses on the caring potential of human love and reciprocity. Under the lens of ecocriticism, my essay studies "the relationship between literature and the physical environment"<sup>3</sup> (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xviii-xix), because in this novel nature, trees in particular, is a significant presence and *agency*, revealing "the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and environment in all areas of cultural production" (Garrard 2004: i). *The Overstory* creatively discusses and promotes a deep pre-patriarchal (or pre-dominator) partnership relationship with life and Nature, imaginatively inviting us to awaken and manifest our utmost potential, remembering and reactivating our innate, *native* and sacred wisdom as beings interconnected with the cosmos:

We are about to destroy each other and the world, because of profound mistakes made in Bronze Age patriarchal [*dominator*] ontology – mistakes about the nature

<sup>1</sup> <https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it/> (consulted on 9/03/2021).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.raimon-panikkar.org/english/gloss-ecosofi.html> (consulted on 9/03/2021).

<sup>3</sup> "What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xviii-xix). Indeed, Powers's novel well responds to Lawrence Buell's list of elements that can define an environmental work: "1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. 2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. 3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the texts' ethical orientation. 4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text" (1995: 7-8).

of being, about the nature of human being in the world. Evolution itself is a time-process, seemingly a relentless linear unfolding. But biology also dreams, and in its dreams and waking visions it outleaps time, as well as space. It experiences prevision, clairvoyance, telepathy, synchronicity. Thus we have what has been called a magical capacity built into our genes. It is built into the physical universe. Synchronicity is a quantum phenomenon. The tachyon is consciousness, which can move faster than light. So, built into our biological-physical selves evolving linearly through time and space, is an authentically magical capacity to move spirally, synchronously, multisensorially, simultaneously back and forth, up and down, in and out through all time and space. In our DNA is a genetic memory going back through time to the first cell, and beyond; back through space to the big bang (the cosmic egg), and before that. To evolve then – to save ourselves from species extinction – we can activate our genetic capacity for magic. We can go back in time to our prepatriarchal [*partnership*] consciousness of human oneness with the earth. This memory is in our genes, *we have lived it*, it is ours (Sjöö & Mor 1991: 422).

In investigating his characters' deep relationship with trees, Powers' novel indicates that – through their fruitful and creative *inter-independence* (Panikkar, in Phan & Young 2018: 193) – humans and plants (and all other forms of life, including minerals) need to join forces to overcome the globalising, aggressive, exploitative dominator model ruling the planet and our lives. This to re-create a harmonious, systemic, ecosophical relationship among each other and the Earth: “through fungal synapses linked up in a network the size of the planet” (499). Our brain synapses work and are analogous to the functioning of the fungi, as an interconnected network of information and messages that form our world-view and lives. Plants are the living manifestation of flexibility and solidity, of a cooperative inner design, a diffused and ‘democratic’ system of control, with no specific ‘centre’. Plants are able to reproduce themselves with simplicity, to adjust with ease and velocity to environmental changes (Mancuso 2017a), to respond with resilience to natural and human made disasters: “Trees and other kinds of vegetation have proven to be remarkably resilient to the intense radiation around the [Chernobyl] nuclear disaster zone”<sup>4</sup>.

Like trees and plants' roots, which we do not see as they go deeper into the soil and widely spread inside the Earth, human beings are invisibly interconnected and inter-independent as inhabitants of the planet, who should know well that “there's always as much belowground as above” (Powers 2018: 3)<sup>5</sup>. If we “*tune down to the lowest frequencies*” (3, italics in the original), we all can remember and feel a silent universal, intimate spiritual language, where trees are “*saying things, in words before words*” (3, italics in the original). What trees are whispering in their vibrational language can save the planet from destruction. This is what *The Overstory* intimates to the reader, intertwining the tendrils of human life with

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190701-why-plants-survived-chernobyls-deadly-radiation> (consulted on 9/03/2021); <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/forests-around-chernobyl-arent-decaying-properly-180950075/> (consulted on 7/03/2021); <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19525043/> (consulted on 7/03/2021).

<sup>5</sup> All subsequent citations are taken from this edition.

the ancestral ones of trees. As Benozzo says, we always need to revive our relationship with the Sacred Wood, the forest, as archetypal foundation of our profound sense of the sacred:

When we get out from known streets and paths to enter into the deep thicket, we decide to interrupt the chain of our habitual emotions and gestures to find again a resonance with the elements from which we germinated. In this sense, to lose oneself in the forest is a poetic act, a rejuvenation of sclerotised perceptions, a perpetuation of that naming of the world which gave birth to our language and our oneiric projections (Benozzo 2021: 50, my translation).

*The Overstory* stems from this experience of entering symbolically and physically into the ancestral forest we abandoned to become 'civilised', thus progressively deracinating our humanity from our common roots and harmony with the planet. It shows how this *inter-independence* with Mother Earth and all Her children is necessary for our psychic and spiritual health. The health of our bodies is certainly important but not to the prize of our dehumanisation, isolation and psychological sickness. Our bodies are always in transition from one form to another; our cells are in constant living transformation and are part of a greater inclusive and interlaced process, of a wondrous whole. Our *dis-ease* stems from the loss of our co-identity with the planet and all other creatures. Our society and world are dis-eased because we need to re-establish interconnectedness with all things – *easefully*, with levity, passion, enthusiasm and joy. Rather than falling into a more and more devastating and absurd idea of needing to control everything through technology, for the safety of our *true* lives we need to recognise "the voice and song that had accompanied us and that we had lost, the multitudes of lives that inhabited us" (Benozzo 2021: 51, my translation).

## 2. Tree ... he watching you

*The Overstory* shows some interesting analogies with most literature and storytelling from Aboriginal/Native peoples worldwide, who have a deep environmental sensitivity and awareness of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge calls "The One Life" (1983: 101). The quotations in the novel's epigraph create a network of wisdom going beyond time, space, and form, connecting authors from different backgrounds and epochs, who are all conscious of the foundational importance of our relationship with the planet, and of the planet with us. In the first quotation of the epigraph, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the XIXth century Transcendentalist poet-philosopher suggests that there is "an occult relation between man and vegetable" that gives him "the greatest delight". Delight is an expression often used by Coleridge in his poetry to express a sense of oneness with all life in nature and with God (Riem 2005: 84, 120). The second quotation in the epigraph is from the contemporary scientist and environmentalist James Lovelock, who thinks of the Earth as Gaia (1972; Lovelock & Margulis 1974; Tyrrell 2013), which is "alive like a tree. A tree that quietly exists, never moving except to sway in the wind, yet endlessly conversing with the sunlight and the soil". This endless conversation seems to be quite lost while we are in the grip of technology which, while pretending to ease our 'cares', in reality aims at controlling and pre-conditioning our choices and lives. The third quotation is from the Australian Aboriginal writer and playwright Bill Neidje, the last

speaker of his indigenous language, Gaagudju, from the Kakadu region, which gave the name to the Kakadu National Park<sup>6</sup>. In his grandiose book *Story about Feeling* (1989), Bill Neidjie, describes his profound feelings of interconnection with all life and the land. Here is the passage from Neidjie that Powers quotes to describe the ongoing pulsating life of trees and all natural life, even while we sleep:

Tree ... he watching you. You look at tree, he listens to you. He got no finger, he can't speak. But that leaf ... pumping, growing, growing in the night. While you sleeping you dream something. Tree and grass same thing (epigraph).

This awareness of plants being 'alive' and pulsating is also present in the most recent studies of the neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso (2017a: 7-11) and others (Gagliano *et al.* 2017; Gagliano 2018). Mancuso and Capra also focus on the systemic and complex organisational networks and structures that describe the planet as an interconnected self-regulated living system (Capra & Mancuso 2019: 14-15).

Neidjie's reference to dreams of course is connected to the Aboriginal concept of the unbroken interconnection of humans, nature and ancestral life, expressed in the primordial sacred energy of the *Djang* in Neidjie's language, translated in English as *Dreaming*, or sometimes the *Law*. The Dreaming has different names according to different Aboriginal languages, such as, for example, *Jukurpa* for the Ngarrkico language groups, *Tjukurpa* for the Western desert peoples, *Aaltyerre* for the Aranda groups. What is known as Chief Seathl 1852 "oration" about the importance and sacredness of all life gives voice to very similar poetic expressions in North American indigenous discourse:

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.

We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of a pony, and man, all belong to the same family.

The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you our land, you must remember that it is sacred. [...]

Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our Mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth. This we know: the

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Neidjie (c.1920 - 23 May 2002) <https://trove.nla.gov.au/people/572859> (consulted on 9/03/2021). On the topic of 'lost' Australian Aboriginal languages, please see the impressive work done by Professor Ghil'ad Zuckermann, Chair of Linguistics and Endangered Languages at the University of Adelaide, Australia, who, since 2017, has been a chief investigator in an NHMRC research project assessing language revival and mental health: <http://www.zuckermann.org/> (consulted on 19/04/2020).

earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand of it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself [...].

This earth is precious to us. It is also precious to you. One thing we know: There is only one God. No man, be he Red Man or White Man, can be apart. We are all brothers (Noah Seathl, Chief of the Suwamisu Tribe. Seattle, U.S.A.)<sup>7</sup>.

Significantly, Noah Seathl anticipates by about 150 years Capra's idea of the "web of life" (1997), and the latest discoveries related to quantum physics; or rather, they both give voice to the ancient wisdom that sees Life as One, as found in the Tao, in *Advaita Vedānta* (Pelissero 2004: 283-293), and in many other ancient world spiritual traditions that have gone amiss, because of a "brief forgetting":

We must remember the chemical connections between our cells and the stars, between the beginning and now. We must remember and reactivate the primal consciousness of oneness between all living things. We must return to that time, in our genetic memory, in our dreams, when we were one species born to live together on earth, as her magic children. These are things human beings have known for most of our time on earth. For at least 500,000 years of human time we have known them; for about 5 billion years of earth time we have known them; for a good 13 billion years of galactic time we have known them – and, no doubt, longer than that. Set against this long galactic, terrestrial, and human time of knowing our oneness, the past four thousand years of patriarchy's institutional and doctrinal denial of our oneness, once we see it for what it was, will appear a mere aberration. Just a brief forgetting (Sjöö & Mor 1991: 424).

Even if Noah Seathl's oratory has many versions and its origin is somewhat controversial, as it seems there are no recorded documents attesting to it, the sentiments at its core are definitely familiar to those who have a sense of harmony in this "long galactic time of knowing our oneness" and are conscientious and caring about the environment. We also know that 'documented history' is recorded in narratives created by those who have 'won', dominated and overpowered the peoples they colonised, especially the Native 'Other'. From the 1970s, Seathl's text became an environmental wake-up call, warning the world, like Powers does, that we need to change direction, transforming our exploitative Western dominator approach and reverting back to the partnership model of networking with all Life.

### 3. The Understory: Human Protagonists

The very structure of *The Overstory* in its four main sections explicitly names the different elements composing the life-cycle of trees: *Roots*, *Trunk*, *Crown*, *Seeds*, starting from the foundations reaching down in the soil and then moving up towards the sky and finally exploding and diffusing through seeds which will give birth to other plants. The novel itself

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.csun.edu/~vcpsy00h/seattle.htm>; <https://suquamish.nsn.us/home/about-us/chief-seattle-speech/> (consulted on 23/04/2021).

aspires to keep the narration going on in the readers' minds, creating echoes and further meditations, as a poetic appeal towards an active engagement, caution and care about the seeds and fruits of our actions upon the planet.

At the *Roots* of the story, in the nine specific sections devoted to them, there are the nine main characters, who are in one way or the other deeply tied and engaged with at least one specific tree species. Many of these characters come together as engaged and passionate eco-activists; their separate stories progressively come to intersect as their attention and care towards the ecosystem increases in their conscious attempts at actual partnership. They are also 'different', because either they come from immigrant families or they do, say and feel 'strange' things. In one way or another they are outsiders from ordinary society, which aspires mainly to subservient, obedient and compliant 'subjects', who conform to the imposed norms without any critical and independent thinking.

Nicholas Hoel, descendent of Jørgen Hoel, a Norwegian immigrant in Brooklyn, in the long line of his family saga, is tied to the big red chestnut planted in their farm by his ancestor. It became a hereditary habit for the Hoel men to photograph the tree regularly to capture its growth and change, as a pregnant symbol of the family's progressive grounding and 'growth' in their 'new' land.

Mimi Ma, the bright and successful daughter of a Chinese engineer, is connected to a mulberry, his father's 'inheritance' and pride, which is also the site where he commits suicide; she's also related to the pine whispering secrets to her at the opening and ending of the novel.

Adam Appich, grows up in a dysfunctional family: his father was abusive and his older sister Leigh disappeared when Adam was a child. Adam is solitary and decides to study psychology, possibly to solve his own personal problems; later in his life he becomes a respected psychology professor. He is tied with the maple his father planted when he was born, as was the case of his siblings who all have a special personal tree.

Ray Brinkman is a property attorney and his future wife, Dorothy Cazaly, a stenographer. They meet while acting *Macbeth* at a community theatre production where Ray plays Macduff (66); this creates a tie with the oak. Dorothy Cazaly is connected to the linden tree she hits while driving; it is "a radical tree", different from the oak "as a woman to man". As the "bee tree, the tree of peace whose tonics and tears can cure every kind of tension and anxiety" (72), in the same way she will forever cure and be close to Ray. Ray and Dorothy do not get together with the other activists, for the poetical focus here is the loving partnership, even if always inspired and connected to trees.

Douglas Pavlicekis is a Vietnam War veteran who participates to the Stanford Prison Experiments (1971)<sup>8</sup>, one of the many examples in the novel of the dominator system's desire to humiliate, control and debase human 'natural' feelings for each other. This happens in all dictatorships, where sadly, like in the Holocaust and other world atrocities, the dominator narrative is easily imposed or coerced by those in power. He is connected with the Banyan tree that saves his life in the Vietnam War (82), and the Douglas Firs he plants once he

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Stanford-Prison-Experiment> (consulted on 22/04/2021).

discovers immense hidden clearings in the National forests while driving in Idaho (88-89); because of this his nickname is “Doug-fir”; he later meets, helps and falls in love with Mia.

Neelay Metha, who belongs to an Indian migrant family, is a Silicon Valley-based computer genius, paralysed after he fell from an oak, which becomes his totem tree; as an activist he will take the name of Watchman. He has a revealing encounter with the trees in Stanford gardens, where he is studying computer science and this inspires him to invent a very successful epic game of worlds that makes him rich.

Patricia Westford, a scientist, is probably inspired by the real-life ecologist Suzanne Simard<sup>9</sup> and may have connections to the work of the German forester Peter Wohlleben (2016); her tree is the beech.

Olivia Vandergriff, later named Maidenhair, is allied with the giant redwood trees. She is a former student who, after an accidental electrocution and a near-death experience ‘comes back’ and feels in touch with a spiritual voice inspiring her to get involved in the eco-movement against the destruction of the giant redwood trees. It is in this activist context that most of the human characters of the novel will find each other and fight side by side.

The plot of the novel is intertwined like the roots and foliage of the trees which may seem (and possibly are) the real protagonists of the story. In the novel the humans seem to be simply the *understory*, as most of them become entangled within a web of activism and find each other together (at least for a brief time) to ‘save’ trees, because they feel and understand trees are fellow breathing beings, which are being systematically destroyed because of ‘progress’.

They are all people who have unique relationships with trees, in whatever ways these relationships are expressed, but they are actually side characters, ‘outsiders’, insignificant and powerless, unless they unite and harmonise with the rhythmical comings and goings of life, with its moments of hope and exaltation and moments of deep sadness and disease. The difference, according to Eisler’s dominator-partnership paradigm, is made by the conscious choice that each of us can and must make. *The Overstory* shows how the characters flourish in their spiritual awareness of partnership and oneness only when they open to the deeper awareness of a greater ‘cosmic’ frame, where every step they make (or do not make), every little or big choices – all have an impact on themselves, the trees they are tied to (in more than one sense) and the planet. The systematic destruction of forests and trees is “grievable” (Hess 2019: 191-192) and the great poet Gerald Manley Hopkins certainly knew the terrible feeling of loss and inner devastation (Riem 2020) when trees are sacrificed for ‘progress’, as intensely expressed in “Binsley Poplars”:

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,  
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,  
All felled, felled, are all felled;  
Of a fresh and following folded rank  
Not spared, not one  
(ll. 1-5, Hopkins 1992: 206).

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://forestry.ubc.ca/faculty-profile/suzanne-simard/> (consulted on 19/04/2021).



#### 4. *The Overstory*: Symbolism of the Trees

It would be interesting to have an expert ethnobotanist, or a traditional herbalist and midwife, who knows the therapeutic function and mystical symbolism of plants. Someone with a passion for literature too, in order to study the symbolisms of some of the main trees/characters in the novel and their intertwined connections with each other and their human 'relations'. With the help of Cattabiani's (1996), Taraglio's (1997) and Hageneder's (2019) texts on tree and plant symbolism and ancient traditional herbal medicine, I will now engage in a partnership dialogue on this topic. In Partnership Studies, the mythological dimension, connected to how humans narrate their world in order to make sense of their realities, is a fundamental critical perspective. The study of myths, symbols, archetypes can express the depth of life in a more nuanced and poetic way, opening towards a deeper understanding of ourselves and our lives.

Chestnuts, dedicated to Zeus by the Greeks, in Christian symbolism represent goodness and chastity; they are long-lived and drought-resistant trees like Nicholas Hoel. Nick is a casual artist who is unsure about his artistic qualities, but his life changes when he meets Olivia and falls in love with her. After Olivia dies in their attempt at arson, meant to block the destruction of the red giants forests, Nick wanders as a nomadic and continues to write his artistic and provocative messages in nature. He is never caught by the authorities and, at the end of the novel, his "Tree art" will bloom into fuller meaning, when he creates the word "Still" in gigantic letters made of tree trunks and only visible from space. It is a stillness, an apparent quiet, which swarms with life and motion, even if apparently immobile for our human time: "Already, this word is greening. Already, the mosses surge over, the beetles and lichen and fungi turning the logs to soil" (502). It is a continuous metamorphosis: seed into tree, tree into soil that will feed another seed, in a spiralling motion of Life-Death-Regeneration.

The beech of Patricia Westford, Patty the Plant, has an ancient sacred history and was present in various Celtic ceremonies (McSkimming 1992). A sacred beech grove, at Tusculum, was dedicated to Diana, the goddess of the wild woods, certainly in tune with Patricia's passion for and profound understanding of the life of plants. Germanic tribes used to write runic symbols on beech wooden sticks or tiny clay artefacts, as a sort of magical alphabet manifesting the spiritual voices of Nature, as an instrument for inspiration and divination. The beech seems thus to bring together the sacred images of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. Indeed, after Patricia loses her academic position (Tree of Knowledge) and starts living a solitary life as a park ranger, she can be seen as a solitary Diana who loves the vibrant forests (Tree of Life) she protects and oversees.

Mimi Ma's mulberry was used for more than 5,000 years in China (and also later in Italy) as food and home for the silkworm, which produced its soft and elegant threads. In ancient Chinese cosmology, we find the hollow mulberry, the world axial tree, root and centre of the universe: "It is a hermaphrodite, because it dates back to before the separation of yin and yang, male and female, and it represents the Tao, or the all-encompassing cosmic order" (Hageneder 2019: 236). In this sense, it well embodies the capacity of Mimi to balance her feminine and masculine qualities in order to reach her goals. She is smart,

determined and can be severe. Towards the end of the novel, she creates a new form of psychotherapy where she and her client are completely silent and this produces a holistic cathartic healing in both of them. This capacity for silence enables her to hear the 'signals' of trees, both at the beginning and end of the novel, in a circular motion. In the final pages, we find Mimi Ma sitting in a public park, near a pine tree. She hears the pine "*saying things, in words before words*" (3, italics in the original) and this 'silent' speech is similar to Mimi's experimental psychotherapy. In many traditions the pine is sacred and has manifold uses. The Blackfoot use it to create "story sticks": each notch in the stick indicates a traditional story the elders give to the children of the tribe. The Hopi use some pine resin as a protection from evil magic. The Navajo use it as a ceremonial medicine. In China, Taoist hermits and monks eat pine nuts, which bring longevity. The pine's opening 'silent' speech contains a long list of 16 plant-names and is meant, I believe, to give the right perspective to our reading. It is trees that matter, they are central, focal, important, resilient, eternal: "*Listen. There's something you need to hear*" (4, italics in the original). It is the *Overstory*, it moves at the speed of trees.

### 5. Conclusion: At the Speed of Trees

Human grief and the physical pain connected to loss is something all characters in the novel experience, in one way or the other, as elements of the *understory* of the forest to which they belong. They manifest and express their partnership and dialogic interconnections, and their attempt at transforming the dominator world that engenders those losses and pain into a partnership caring harmony with all things. In human terms, most of the characters fail to achieve their goals, because they believed their goal was to 'save' the trees and forest; they are accused of terrorism, tracked and persecuted, even tortured. Some die, some are imprisoned, some try to return to 'normal', and some remain 'lost', but also finally some find their truest Self. They were all, in a sense, mistaken, because they reasoned (we reason) according to our short human linear time. The trees move at their own "speed", in their own time, which seems tremendously slow to us, almost to the point of appearing non-existent. However, their slow movement is real, trees and plants live on, whisper their truths over and over, sinking their roots deep into that which we destroy – with bombs, cement, intensive farming, greed and exploitation. They spread their sacred seeds, sprout flowers, a tiny shoot, a little trunk, then a gigantic tree. They live on, in partnership with all life, including us human beings, constantly reminding us of our mutual inter-dependence within an ecosophical dimension:

A certain habitual ecological attitude must be overcome in order to go much deeper, seeking a new equilibrium between matter and spirit (Panikkar 1994).

Beyond a simple ecology, ecosophy is a wisdom-spirituality of the earth. 'The new equilibrium' is not so much between man and the earth, as between matter and spirit, between spatio-temporality and consciousness. Ecosophy is neither a mere 'science of the earth' (ecology) nor even 'wisdom about the earth', but rather a

'wisdom of the earth herself' that is made manifest to man when he knows how to listen to her with love<sup>10</sup>.

By bringing Eisler's domination-partnership model into 'dialogical dialogue' with this ambitious and multi-faceted novel, with its special focus on myths and symbols as positive and active energies and instruments to achieve cultural transformation, I demonstrate the relevance of Partnership Studies as applied to environmentally conscious texts such as *The Overstory*.

There are significant and numerous instances in the novel where characters creatively harmonise with the cyclical life of Trees, offering their symbolic and regenerative poetic actions in order to illumine themselves and their world. Apocalyptic visions are replaced with visions of fluid regeneration, new seeds are planted, seeds of a new conscious humanity. For example, Patricia Westerford metaphorically flings green liquid over her audience as an invitation to see, feel and become 'green'. Neelay Metha creates an ecological computer game showing how a different and visionary approach to technology can inspire alternative and positive solutions for our lives. Nick Hoel's aspires to a greening organic world created in partnership with and in Nature. He composes the word "STILL" with natural elements, trees in particular, a mythical message visible from outer space, maybe as a signal and a poetic 'call' to other cosmic dimensions. These are all 'signals' that one can transform things, even with small and apparently insignificant actions. Mimi Ma hears 'signals' at the close of the novel:

The signals say: *A good answer is worth reinventing from scratch, again and again.*

They say: *The air is the mix we must keep making.*

They say: *There's as much belowground as above.*

They tell her: *Do not hope or despair or predict or be caught surprised. Never capitulate, but divide, multiply, transform, conjoin, do, and endure as you have all the long day of life.*

*There are seeds that need fire. Seeds that need freezing. Seeds that need to be swallowed, etched by digestive acid, expelled as waste. Seeds that must be smashed open before they'll germinate.*

*A thing can travel everywhere, just by holding still* (500, italics in the original).

Mimi has now no more expectations or plans, she knows how to achieve a final arboreal metamorphosis, she is completely "Still", because "This will never end" (502). These closing words emphasise the novel's partnership message about the necessary conditions for the survival of our ecosystem, involving active human resolution, endurance, gratitude and responsibility, and bearing witness to the interconnectedness of all life forms. Mimi has learnt to listen with love to the wisdom of Mother Earth, she is now one of Her children. Her small body contains all the other seeds her friends were, burnt with fire, expelled as waste, swallowed, frozen, smashed open, dead and reborn, forever anew, like a little robin appearing on the balcony, then swiftly and elegantly flying away.

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.raimon-panikkar.org/english/gloss-ecosofi.html> and <https://www.avvenire.it/agera/pagine/ecosofia-teilhard-a-panikkar> (consulted on 9/03/2021).

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