Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

Vol. XXIV-No. 26 November 2026 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-268

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Sensing the Chthulucene: Multisensory Scapes and Posthuman Kinship in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*

Abstract I: Nel contesto dell'Antropocene, la letteratura fatica a rendere conto delle proporzioni sistemiche del collasso ecologico globale. Questo articolo esamina *The Overstory* (2018) e *Bewilderment* (2021) di Richard Powers come testi fondamentali che provano a superare questa parziale crisi immaginativa con la costruzione di paesaggi multisensoriali radicati nel "presente denso" di Donna Haraway e nell'ecocritica materiale. Si sosterrà che Powers, attraverso ambienti immersivi e ricchi di stimoli sensoriali, che spaziano dalle reti arboree alle simulazioni astrobiologiche, va oltre il semplice smantellamento dei binarismi cartesiani per esplorare le possibilità trasformative, ma anche i rischi, delle epistemologie e ontologie postumane proiettate verso una radicale riconnessione fenomenologica con gli equilibri della materialità della Terra.

Abstract II: In the Anthropocene, literary representation struggles to capture the sheer scale of planetary ecological collapse. This article examines Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and *Bewilderment* (2021) as key texts that address this imaginative crisis through the construction of multisensory scapes. Drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of the "thick present" and material ecocriticism, the article explores how Powers' multisensory environments unsettle conventional distinctions between human and non-human forms of agency and perception. Through phenomenologically immersive landscapes, ranging from the communication networks of ancient forests to astrobiological experiments, Powers goes beyond merely dismantling Cartesian binaries to explore both the transformative possibilities and the risks of posthuman epistemologies and ontologies oriented towards a radical phenomenological reconnection with the Earth's material equilibrium.

Keywords: Multisensory scapes, Richard Powers, Material ecocriticism, Posthuman kinship, Anthropocene.

1. Storied Matter and Multisensory Scapes against the Imaginative Paralysis of the Anthropocene

The emergence of the Anthropocene era has inevitably ruptured our established notions of historical and geological time. Human activities now operate as destabilising agents driving

extinction, deforestation, and environmental degradation on an unparalleled scale. However, depicting this reality in fiction poses a severe epistemological challenge, as traditional forms of the bourgeois novel tend to break down in the face of nonlinear realities such as ecological catastrophe and the surrealities of global warming (Ghosh 2016), or when attempting to cram geological eras into the scope of human existence. To make sense of this collapse, environmental philosophy has turned towards what Donna Haraway (2016) defines as the "Chthulucene", an epoch marked by humanity's messy entanglements with an ill Earth. Haraway encourages us to "stay with the trouble" by making kin in the "thick present" (Haraway 2016: 1), a complicated mesh where humanity and other beings are interlinked through mutual impacts, akin to the synaptic hyphae of fungi connecting the Earth's roots. Inhabiting this present requires abandoning the Cartesian dualism that severs Nature from Culture and enables the exploitative "dominator model"[1] identified by Riane Eisler (1995; Eisler & Fry 2019). Instead, material ecocriticism offers a language for radically attuning to the senses: Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann argue that matter possesses agency and acts as communicative "storied matter" (2014: 1), while Jane Bennett (2010) urges a recognition of "vibrant matter" actively participating in worldly events. This communicative materiality is echoed in David Abram's (1996: 137-179) embodied phenomenology, which frames human perception as a participatory exchange with an animate landscape, and in the "ecosophy" which seeks a partnership between humans and the Earth, based on the realisation that the whole world is unified and all life shares a common evolutionary ancestry from its cellular beginnings (Panikkar 1994; Sjöö & Mor 1991).

Against this theoretical backdrop, Richard Powers emerges as a prominent contemporary voice addressing the representational crisis of the Anthropocene. In his novels *The Overstory* (2018) and *Bewilderment* (2021), Powers deftly weaves scientific knowledge with literary theory and posthumanism, reshaping literary sensibility to reflect the pressing realities of ecology. A substantial body of scholarship has fruitfully mapped this response, analysing his characters' ecological grief (Hess 2019), his conceptualisation of interspecies empathy (Song 2023; Mohiuddin 2024), his formal use of "eco-ekphrasis" to visually mediate unthinkable scales of geological time (Kurr 2025), and, more generally, Powers' shift away from a patriarchal model towards what Antonella Riem (2021) has termed a "biocultural partnership" based on love and reciprocity. However, existing criticism often favours cognitive or ocularcentric ecological analyses, portraying the posthuman pursuit of kinship as an aspirational expansion of human empathy. What remains underexplored is the profoundly somatic, visceral friction involved in dismantling the boundary between human and environment. Indeed, while it is true that Powers reiterates the need to overcome anthropocentrism, he does not do so by establishing an overly broad opposition between Western epistemology and more-than-human relationality. Rather than presenting posthuman kinship as a utopian cure for habitat destruction, he uses these crises to also explore the frictions

[1] Riane Eisler's "dominator" and "partnership" models describe two different orientations along a relational and sociocultural continuum. Whereas the former is structured by rigid hierarchies, control, and exploitation, the latter favours more equitable relationships grounded in care, cooperation, reciprocity, and respect for the more-than-human world.

and limits of adopting fully posthuman knowledge and being. Consequently, a critical gap persists in understanding how Powers formally translates systemic theories of planetary entanglement into lived, bodily realities.

Building on my previous analysis of environmental ethics, interconnectedness, and posthuman ecologies in *The Overstory* (De Riso 2025), the present study places *The Overstory* in dialogue with *Bewilderment* and extends the theoretical framework through material ecocriticism and embodied phenomenology in order to explore a broader range of phenomenological experiences, from terrestrial environments to astrobiological and AI-mediated landscapes. It thereby shifts the focus towards multisensory scapes and the transformative possibilities, contradictions, and risks of posthuman epistemologies and ontologies. To address this underexplored dimension, I introduce the concept of multisensory scapes to extend, revise, and complicate current understandings of posthuman kinship in Powers' fiction. Drawing on material ecocriticism and bodily phenomenology, I argue that Powers circumvents the representational crisis of the Anthropocene by forcing his characters, and the reader, into a radical somatic surrender to the Earth's storied matter. I define multisensory scapes as sensory-rich, immersive environments experienced via a full phenomenological array of sight, sound, smell, and touch. Powers' environments refuse to remain passive stages; weather patterns, ancient alders, paramecia, and atmospheric compositions exert constant, undeniable pressure on the characters, enabling the reader to recognise non-human agency as a fundamental epistemological shift required to survive our epoch. Whether through the biochemical communication networks of ancient redwoods, the primal moisture of the Great Smoky Mountains, the virtual life of video games, or the disorienting synesthesia of astrobiological exoplanets, these multisensory scapes demand a physical and emotional decentring of the anthropocentric subject. As anticipated, however, by reading *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment* together it becomes apparent that Powers does not use these immersive environments to merely expose the transformative, sympoietic possibilities of decentring the human. In fact, moving from arboreal frequencies to tactile immersions and astrobiological speculations, Powers also reveals the inherent physical weaknesses and fatal risks of dissolving the boundaries between human bodies and an indifferent Earth, thereby exposing the possibly tragic limits of adopting fully posthuman ontologies.

2. Arboreal Frequencies: Recalibrating the Sensorium in *The Overstory*

The Overstory unfolds as a vast ecological narrative investigating the intimate dependencies between humans and trees, whose lives form what Riem aptly describes as the "understory" (Riem 2021: 34), separate human paths that progressively intersect and entangle with the roots and branches of the forest. According to Powers, humanity's insatiable exploitation of nature stems from a fundamental perceptual deficit, the inability to grasp the temporal dynamics and languages specific to the plant world. From the very beginning, the novel emphasises the urgent need to radically re-educate our senses. The opening chapter, "Roots", acts as a veritable phenomenological threshold: it immediately transports the reader into a multisensory dimension where typically human logocentric communication is transcended and put into perspective by the extraordinary biosemiotic richness of the natural world. Powers models this somatic shift through an anonymous woman engaging

in deep tactile and auditory listening with a pine tree. By deliberately quieting the cognitive dissonance of modern human commerce, she allows her perception to "tune down to the lowest frequencies" (Powers 2018: 6). This sensory re-tuning is essential for inhabiting Haraway's thick present, since only through such profound immersion can subjects begin to interpret the biochemical and vibratory signals – the "messages, [frequencies, and] words before words" (6) – pulsing through the environment. This early insistence on expanding the human sensorium not only anchors the ecological awakening in *The Overstory*, but also prefigures the intense, trans-corporeal empathy that young Robin will seek in the terrestrial and speculative scapes of *Bewilderment*.

More than static backdrops, Powers' silvan environments function as sympoietic webs of active, communicative matter. Echoing Panikkar's ecosophical principles and Haraway's concept of posthuman kinship, the narrative imbues the plant kingdom with an undeniable, dynamic agency. The plant world communicates constantly through a ceaseless flow of complex information. Maple trees, for example, release chemicals into the air to alert neighbouring trees to insect attacks, whilst Douglas-firs interconnect their vascular networks to share nutrients and provide support to damaged plants. Nevertheless, as Powers points out, our access to this communicative exchange faces a significant epistemic limitation, a disconnection that stems from our pervasive "plant-blindness"[2] and a profound imbalance in our sensory perception channels. Humanity is largely unaware of the slow biochemical processes that govern the biosphere. This is because we are constrained to interact with the environment only within narrow time frames that are commensurate with the actual cognitive capacities of the human mind. This narrowing of our sensory bandwidth not only underscores the ecological alienation depicted in *The Overstory*, but also establishes a core epistemological crisis present across Powers' broader eco-fictional project. By reading *The Overstory* alongside *Bewilderment*, it becomes possible to delineate how Powers transitions from merely diagnosing humanity's perceptual failure to actively exploring radical, posthuman methodologies for curing it. The need to transcend our ecological myopia in *The Overstory* becomes the driving structural force of the later novel, manifesting through visceral tactile immersions in the wild and the unprecedented, interspecies neuro-empathy facilitated by the DecNef machine.

Powers employs narrative techniques to help humans transcend their natural time frame and understand that of trees. By formally intertwining individual human paths with the broader biosphere, the text constructs what Marco Caracciolo (2020) defines as an anti-anthropocentric "we-narrative". Through this collective framework, the narrative perspective expands to embrace "nonhuman assemblages" (Caracciolo 2020: 86) of plants and ecosystems, thereby dismantling human exceptionalism on a structural level. The human

[2] This term refers to the inability to perceive or pay attention to the presence of plants in one's surroundings, a phenomenon that leads one to mistakenly regard them as merely a static and passive element of the background, in contrast to animal life, rather than as living, dynamic biological entities. This condition stems from evolutionary factors: the human visual system is structured to prioritise movement, colour variations, and immediate environmental or social threats. Consequently, as plants operate according to distinct temporal rhythms and lack motor capacity and immediate visual stimuli, the mind tends to categorise them as mere visual background noise or as an indistinct green expanse.

protagonists of the "understory" are symbolically allied with specific trees, revealing the mythic and healing potential of a partnership with nature. Patricia Westerford is identified with the beech tree, which is associated with a sacred grove and with the Tree of Knowledge. Her character resembles a solitary tree standing apart from everything else that vibrates as an entire forest. Mimi Ma is paired with the mulberry tree, which is symbolic of the Tao as well as an axis, meaning the whole world order, thus indicating her ability to harmonise feminine and masculine qualities in herself in order to perform a holistic silent healing. After surviving certain death thanks to a banyan tree, Douglas Pavlicek becomes an indefatigable planter of Douglas firs in order to compensate for the destruction caused by clear cutting. Nick Hoel's family documents the growth of a chestnut tree for over a hundred years through a photographic archive that serves as a prime example of a visual prosthetic. By accumulating thousands of static images, the archive constructs a dynamic visual scape that overrides cognitive blindness, allowing the human eye to process non-human frequencies of existence. This optical aggregation translates the abstract concept of natural evolution into a directly observed, sensory-rich reality, making the tree's material presence perceptually accessible. As Antonella Riem observes, embracing such arboreal primacy requires us to adapt to a cycle of "continuous metamorphosis, 'seed into tree, tree into soil'" (2021: 35). Within this multisensory reading, the Hoel archive operates as an immersive tool that visually anchors the subject in the continuous resilience of the biosphere, transcending the limits of the anthropocentric gaze.

Powers deploys narrative devices that function as prosthetic extensions of our perceptual bandwidth, thus counteracting humanity's sensory limitations. This demand for multisensory attunement is further radicalised through Patricia Westerford's embodied engagement with the forest's invisible chemical frequencies. To overcome the pervasive plant-blindness that isolates humanity, Patricia immerses herself in the imperceptible architecture of volatile organic compounds, discovering that untouched maples detect the chemical alarms of infested neighbours:

> The trees under attack pump out insecticides to save their lives. That much is uncontroversial. But something else in the data makes her flesh pucker: trees a little way off, untouched by the invading swarms, ramp up their own defenses when their neighbor is attacked. Something alerts them. They get wind of the disaster, and they prepare [...] The wounded trees send out alarms that other trees smell. Her maples are signaling. They're linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system across acres of woodland. These brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other (Powers 2018: 116).

Her research reconfigures the forest into a dense, interactive olfactory and biochemical scape which ceases to be a mute backdrop and emerges, instead, as a breathing, aromatic network where airborne aerosols constitute a material syntax. By decoding these transmissions, Patricia acts as a sensory translator, rendering the biochemical respiration of the woods into a legible phenomenological experience. Ultimately, *The Overstory* creates a narrative where forging posthuman kinship demands an acute, multisensory surrender and an

epistemological breakthrough that pave the way for the intensely tactile immersions and neuro-cognitive empathy that Powers will explore in *Bewilderment*.

3. Decentring the Human: Terrestrial, Virtual, and Astrobiological Scapes

Insofar as *The Overstory* reconfigures the human relationship to time and agency in plants, Powers' subsequent novel, *Bewilderment*, emphasises the direct experience of the human body within the biosphere. Following the tragic death of his wife, Alyssa, astrobiologist Theo Byrne relocates his highly sensitive son, Robin, to a rented cabin in the Great Smoky Mountains to escape their suburban alienation. Powers brings this terrestrial setting to life through a rich sensory array that brutally reconnects the protagonists with nature. Visually, the pristine landscape offers celestial clarity, sitting on "the edge of one of the last patches of darkness in the eastern U.S." (Powers 2021: 6), where the Milky Way is rendered as "countless speckled placers in a black streambed" (6)[3]. Olfaction further anchors the characters, collapsing the Cartesian boundary between the domestic interior, smelling of "pine spritzed with bacon" (7), and the wild exterior. Smellscapes are rife throughout the narrative, directly connecting man to nature without the interference of reason. Scent operates on an ancient, limbic level, demanding immediate physiological acknowledgement.

Most importantly, tactile immersion plunges the characters into the tangible matter of the biosphere. The somatic shock of freezing river rapids forces a total physical surrender to the power of nature, dispelling the notion of human exceptionalism:

> The water shocked my chest and shoved me toward a tumble of rocks. What looked level from the shore was a whole rolling range of submerged micro-mountains. I plunged into the turbulence. My foot slid on a slick stone worn smooth by centuries of falling water. Then I remembered how to do this. I sat down in the torrent and let the chill river crash over me. At his first touch of frigid current, Robin screamed. But the pain lasted only half a minute and his shrieks turned to laughter. "Keep low", I called. "Crawl. Channel your inner amphibian" (Powers 2021: 21).

The "ecstatic churn" of the water represents a tactile experience that feels "like a planet where the gravity keeps changing" (Powers 2021: 21, 22). By forcing the human posture back into a primal state, this multisensory scape washes away abstract intellectualisation, allowing Robin to experience what Stacy Alaimo (2008) defines as "trans-corporeality", the continuous exchange of matter and agency with the more-than-human world.

However, while Robin's immersion in the rapids forces a raw, localised surrender of the physical body, Powers recognises that the systemic scale of the Anthropocene cannot be comprehended through somatic shock alone. To overcome this imaginative limitation, the narrative deliberately oscillates from the violently embodied to the radically disembodied. Indeed, confronted with the claustrophobia of terrestrial ecological collapse, Powers shifts the narrative gaze outward to speculative, non-physical scapes: the virtual reality ecosystems in *The Overstory* and the astrobiological exoplanets in *Bewilderment*. These speculative

[3] Hereafter, references to Powers (2021) will be indicated by page number only.

environments act as vast thought experiments designed to systematically dismantle human exceptionalism. Powers lays the formal groundwork for these speculative, disembodied environments in *The Overstory*, where Neelay's attempt to rectify capitalist accumulation by modelling a digital game on natural laws, Mastery, functions as an immersive, algorithmic prosthetic designed to artificially expand human sensory bandwidth. Frustrated by the limited digital environments of the early versions of the game, which offered "no smell, no touch, no taste, no feel" (2018: 196), and which also suffered from the Midas syndrome (that is, prompting players to accumulate capital endlessly), Neelay redesigned his virtual universe from scratch with the aim of modelling the material and historical complexity of the Earth. By creating a biologically rich cybernetic ecosystem, within which players come to "count 750 kinds of simulated plants" (238) endowed with realistic nutrient cycles, Powers explores how the experience of virtual immersion can broaden our cognitive understanding of the Anthropocene. In this cyber-empyrean dimension, human users and artificial intelligence converge to the point of "absorb[ing] everything, eat[ing] every scrap of data" (419), learning to "think like rivers and forests and mountains" (411). By projecting human consciousness into a digital scape that employs ecological processes, this simulated immersion aligns with Haraway's notion of "tentacular thinking" (2016: 30) to reveal how real intelligence necessitates the reconciliation between human constructions of language and the "language of green things" (Powers 2018: 411). Moreover, it also serves as the structural precursor to the speculative scapes in *Bewilderment*, prefiguring how Theo and Robin will later rely on planetary models to synthesise multispecies empathy.

Indeed, the latter novel further decentres the human sensorium through astrobiological thought experiments that divest human senses of their presumed superiority. Theo utilises scientific data on biosignature[4] gases to take Robin on fantastic adventures into alien worlds, plunging the reader into environments that facilitate the exploration of new bioethical perspectives and render ocularcentric epistemology useless. On Geminus, a planet whose surface is divided into day and night regions, the novel makes use of binary contrasts that parallel the planet's ecology of fire and ice. On Pelagos, an infinite oceanic planet, rampant aquatic biodiversity is expressed through "intelligent kelp hundreds of meters long [that] spelled messages in colors" (Powers 2021: 55). Drifting in "interstellar emptiness", on the rogue planet Falasha:

> We went to the bottom of [...] oceans, into their volcanic seams. We aimed our head lamps into the deepest trenches, and he gasped. Creatures everywhere: white crabs and clams, purple tube worms and living draperies. Everything fed on the heat and chemistry oozing from hydrothermal vents [...] The vents spewed and cooled. The currents of the waters shifted. Small upheavals and local catastrophes favored the cagey. Sessile barnacles turned into free swimmers, and swimmers developed the power to predict. Pilgrim adventurers colonized new places (Powers 2021: 35).

[4] The term refers to specific atmospheric compositions or mixes of gases on exoplanets that indicate the presence of living processes. Theo creates computational models to predict these biosignature gases to determine if a distant planet is alive. In other words, such models act as spectral "fingerprints" of ecosystems.

Challenging the long-standing ocularcentric tendency of Western epistemology, Powers transports the reader to the perpetually dark planet Nithar. Here, subjects are compelled to inhabit an alien phenomenology where they "hear in something like color" and navigate by instinctively reading "thermal gradients and magnetic fields" (172). By replacing visual dominance with raw thermodynamic pulses and synesthetic arrays, Powers achieves a profound cognitive estrangement, proving that our default mode of perception is merely one of countless evolutionary possibilities for encountering the universe's communicative materiality. More generally, in all of these speculative biomes, the human gaze is humbled by the sheer scale of deep time and extreme materiality, a cognitive estrangement that deliberately reallocates the sensorium to prove that our default mode of perception is but one fragment of a vastly larger cosmic syntax. Our existence in an infinite cosmos capable of spawning intelligent beings in any number of bizarre ways leaves our arrogance in a state of absurdity at best and morally indefensible at worst.

4. The Empathy Machine and the Limits of Simulation

Powers does not arbitrarily juxtapose virtual reality and river rapids; rather, he systematically exhausts all available scales of human perception to break down anthropocentric thinking. And if the cosmos offers vast, unimaginable scapes, *Bewilderment* violently retracts its gaze inward to the microscopic architecture of the human brain, searching for an internal scape where profound ecological empathy might be forged. This occurs as Decoded Neurofeedback (DecNef), an experimental machine for AI-mediated empathy, is introduced. While undergoing fMRI training, Robin is taught to replicate the neural patterns of the target individual, in this case, a recording of his dead mother when she experiences pure ecological "ecstasy" while thinking about the natural world. Thanks to the technology, Robin gains insight into the profound happiness and affinity for the biosphere that Alyssa feels, thus undergoing a radical transformation of his own understanding of the world. Now he is able to examine the micro-ecosystems around him and differentiate bird songs by their pitch, as well as to notice small red hairs beneath the leaves of scarlet oaks. Using DecNef, Robin achieves posthuman community and eliminates the separation between the internal and external worlds.

But looking at this breakthrough purely from the perspective of a technological utopia raises significant philosophical problems. By offering a simulated landscape, the DecNef machine generates a heavily mediated and highly filtered form of empathy that acts as a neuroprosthetic shield. Through this device, Robin's painful solidarity with a declining Earth is converted into a more bearable sense of wonder. This emotional shift initially seems to align with what Linda Hess identifies in Powers' work as an "aesthetics of wonder" (2019: 190), a state that ideally functions to weave human subjects into more-than-human "networks of the grievable". Serving as a stark counterpoint to this organic ideal, however, the novel exposes a profound tension in this technological utopia: because the posthuman connection is synthesised in a laboratory, it remains unstable, artificial, and algorithm-driven. Although it allows Robin to reintegrate into society by temporarily alleviating his anxiety about the Anthropocene, DecNef represents nothing more than a precarious palliative, with the

inherent risk of commodifying ecological sensitivity itself. When the political establishment abruptly shuts down the programme, the fragility of this technologically synthesised empathy is violently exposed. Robin is severed from his artificial sanctuary and, as the neuroprosthetic shield is stripped from him, the limits of simulated kinship are exposed, dropping him harshly back into a world of unfiltered ecological destruction.

The tragic ending of the novel forces an examination of the danger of artificial stability, necessitating a return to the unfiltered experience of tactile immersion. While running away from the mountains with Theo, Robin finds hundreds of rock formations along the riverbeds, tourist constructions that have violently disturbed the habitats of salamanders and microorganisms living there. Without his shield, he uses the empathic power cultivated through his mother's memories to fix the river. In the freezing dead of night, Robin slips into the treacherous centre of the rapids to dismantle the cairns. The sensory architecture of this scene is harrowing, stripping away all abstract theory to reveal raw, physical peril. Its tragic climax exposes a terrifying asymmetry in material ecocriticism: vibrant matter possesses agency, but it is entirely indifferent to human empathy. Stripped of his neuroprosthetic shield, Robin's ultimate trans-corporeal surrender is met with the lethal reality of the elements:

> I lifted him onto the tiny island he'd been hugging and held him in place while I climbed up next to him. I stripped off his pants and shirt, taking forever to get the wet clothes off his skin. His T-shirt clung in a heap on the narrow boulder; his tiny jeans slipped off and washed downstream. His shivering got worse. I tried to dry him, but only succeeded in speeding the chill of evaporation. I fought to stay calm and concentrate [...] But my skin was as cold and wet as his. I lifted my head. The world was silvered and still. Even the river tumbled too slowly to be real (Powers 2021: 223).

Such a chilling sensory closure completely dismantles the romantic utopianism of interspecies harmony. As Robin's father desperately pulls him from the freezing current, the posthuman subject is reduced to its fragile biological limits: "Slurred sounds came from his mouth, nothing like words" (223). The logocentric boundaries that once insulated the human subject are washed away, revealing that an unmediated immersion in the thick present can bring its own mortal vulnerabilities, draining the abstract ideal of ecological kinship into an environment of unfeeling detachment. Despite Theo's frantic efforts to pull him to the bank and warm him, the sheer physical force of the environment Robin sought to protect ultimately consumes him.

Robin's death in the freezing river marks the tragic culmination of his absolute ecological attunement, functioning as a stark warning against the romanticisation of posthuman kinship. While his physical surrender to the multisensory scape of the river represents the ultimate act of bodily trans-corporeality, it also reveals that vibrant matter is not inherently benevolent or reciprocal. The river does not reciprocate Robin's empathy; its indifferent, material agency simply consumes him. In effect, he literally loses his life by rebuilding the ecology of a riverbed for amphibian species. Here, Powers introduces an unsettling counterargument to the dream of frictionless multispecies harmony: unmediated, radical immersion in Ha-

raway's thick present may ultimately prove incompatible with individual human survival. Rather than offering a comforting catharsis or suggesting that a mere rejection of Cartesian dualism will save us, Powers is aware of the possibility that the absolute dismantling of the boundaries between human and environment brings its own share of unpredictable dangers. Here, the novels' exploration of posthuman ontologies reaches its tragic limit. Multisensory scapes expose posthuman kinship's inherent contradictions and physical risks, demonstrating that moving beyond Western anthropocentrism is not a simple return to harmony, but a transition which may demand a toll that humanity could hardly be equipped to pay.

5. Conclusion: Inhabiting the Thick Present

At a time when humanity is increasingly disconnected from its environment, *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment* do more than chronicle the unravelling of our environment. These novels are written as stories whose purpose is to literally change the way humans perceive their surroundings. The paralysis of knowing during the Anthropocene epoch cannot be cured through the collection of more information about climate change or through remote optical surveillance via satellites. Rather, Powers believes that true environmental consciousness requires a deeper dive into the material reality of our existence. By utilising immersive multisensory environments, from the biochemical tongue of roots to the cold physical crunch of mountain rivers to the disorienting synesthesia of hypothetical exoplanets, Powers compels us to experience an extreme decentring of the human subject. Not only does the environment play an active rather than passive role in the narrative, but it demands a sympoietic existence for both characters and the reader. We must learn to co-think, co-feel, and co-exist through the practice of making kin, in accordance with Donna Haraway, in order to survive the epistemological upheaval of our epoch. Both Robin's tragic sacrifice in the river and the Hoel family's hundred-year dedication to photography point to the same demanding ethical challenge.

Crucially, however, Powers does not offer posthuman kinship as a simplistic or utopian panacea to Western dualism, but rather as a fraught dialectical struggle. To make kin in the Chthulucene, we must shed our anthropocentric shells, lower our frequencies and fully immerse ourselves in the complex immediacy of life, even as we accept the potential pitfalls and deadly challenges that this immersion entails. Through their unflinching exploration of the potential and tragic limits of multisensory attunement, Powers' novels offer a fictional reimagining of the body as the living Earth itself, and a means of navigating life after the human, albeit one still clouded in mystery.

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