

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

“It's a World of Trees, Where Humans Have Just Arrived”

A Comparative Study on Contemporary Narratives
About Trees

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Année académique 2019-2020
Master en langues et lettres modernes, orientation générale, à finalité
approfondie (anglais-français)

Nous sommes tellement éloignés de la nature, nous l'avons tellement modifiée, manipulée, détruite, nous avons si bien oublié qu'elle est l'art par excellence, que seul un artifice de plus, celui de l'art humain, peut nous aider à la retrouver. Parce que nous avons perdu toute relation d'immédiateté avec la nature, nous avons besoin de la médiation supplémentaire de l'art pour restaurer l'unité que nous formions avec elle¹.

— herman de vries²

¹ "We are so estranged from nature, we have modified, manipulated and destroyed it so much; we have forgotten so well that it is art par excellence, that only one more device, that of human art, can help us to reconnect with it. Because we have lost all sense of immediacy with nature, we need the additional mediation of art to restore the unity we once had with it." (*My translation*)

² herman de vries chooses not to capitalise his name because he is opposed to hierarchical ways of thinking.

Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to thank my professor Ben De Bruyn for his detailed comments and his involvement in the correction of my master thesis. With him I discovered the fascinating world of ecocriticism and I thank him for that.

I would like to thank my family for their support: I am grateful to my mother for always listening to my complaints and for her unfailing encouragement and support. I also want to thank my father for worrying about the progress of my dissertation and for suggesting to relax even when there was no time to do so. I am thankful to my brother for putting up with me for all these long days of lockdown when we had to study together; thanks for always laughing at my lousy jokes. Thanks to Spip, even if her help is not really noticeable, I know that deep down she supports me.

A big thank you to Vishank for his unfailing patience and his instructions worthy of a Buddhist monk; I hope one day to be as enlightened as you. Thanks to your tee-shirts for absorbing my tears.

I would also like to thank my friends, without whose help I would be lost. Thank you, Laura, for your resourcefulness and all the great tips which helped me a lot. I am thankful to Heloise for bringing her bright mood in the library. Thanks to Francesca for checking on the language.

Last but not least, I would also like to thank Patricia Goffin for her energy and inspiration.

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Introduction

When I was a child, I sometimes went to the public library with my mother to select some books to read for bedtime. Once, she picked up an audiobook called *L'arbre qui pleure*³ (2007) by Marlène Jobert. The story was that of an old woodcutter named Victor who one day, as usual, went to the forest to cut down trees. On that day, the woodcutter had barely put his axe in an oak tree, when a horrifying sound came from the tree on which his axe fell. The tree was howling in pain. Against a terrifying musical background, the storyteller and narrator of the story said that the other trees of the forest started moving as if they wanted to escape from the woodcutter and his axe. The narrator added that the “overwhelming desire [of the other trees] to stay alive moved Victor deeply⁴” (Jobert & Mansot, 2007). After that remarkable episode, the woodcutter feels disgusted by his work and swears to the trees that he will quit his job immediately. The agonising sound of the tree was so disturbing for the child I was that it still remains in my memory today. The woodcutter later finds a job as a gardener for a rich family, but when Christmas comes and the mistress of the house asks Victor to cut a tree, Victor refuses and says he would rather leave than fell a tree. When he is about to leave, Victor and the little girl of the house witness the trees turn gold, and the little girl who was mute recovers her voice. The little girl and her mother understand the mysterious link between the trees and their gardener, and in the following years, they decorate their Christmas tree in the forest. The story has no link with the climate crisis, but it is interesting to note how such an expression of pain – the cry of the oak tree – can speak to the child/reader and relate to his own experience of pain and thus foster empathy for the tree.

1. *Trees in literature*

Marlène Jobert’s story is a clear example of a narrative establishing a bond between a human and a tree, a bond created by a shared experience of pain. There are countless stories with trees in literature, but more often these stories are about forests as a whole, a body of trees that forms one entity. Forests have always been there as a setting in literature, however, forests are also used in literature because of their strong symbolic value. A forest has an ambivalent symbolism and is often represented as either an enchanted place or an ominous one. For instance, the epic called *Gilgamesh*, “whose Sumerian version [c. the second millennium BC] figures as the oldest literary work in history” (Harrison, 1992, p.14), narrates the crusade Gilgamesh leads against

³ *The Crying Tree*

⁴ “Leur immense désir de rester vivant bouleversa Victor ” (Jobert & Mansot, 2007, my translation)

the demon of the forest, Huwawa (Harrison, 1992, p.15). Old fairy tales, like *Little Red Riding Hood*, take the forest as setting because of the atmosphere of danger it conveys. The symbolism of forests can still be found in contemporary novels and other works of art. To cite only three examples, Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest* (1998), Claire Fuller's *Our Endless Numbered Days* (2015) and Adelinne Dieudonné *La Vraie vie*⁵ (2018) all feature an ambivalent forest. The forest is in these stories on the one hand a place to learn and grow as an individual, as well as a shelter to hide from danger. On the other hand, it is also a place from where the danger comes – the forest as a primitive and unruly place is in fact an extremely recurrent stereotype in many literary works, it is the “shadow of civilization” as Harrison puts it. From the forest comes a rapist in *Into the Forest*; in *Little Red Riding Hood* it is a wolf, in *Our Endless Numbered Days*, the father of the protagonist goes mad from living in the woods and becomes a threat to his daughter. In *La Vraie vie*, the father of the narrator organises a vicious hunting game in which the narrator is hunted like a prey.

Apart from symbolic uses of the forest, these stories are not really concerned about the forest and the singular trees in their literal meaning, i.e. simply as living beings which live on earth with other living beings (humans and animals)⁶. One of the reasons why we might want to consider this specific relation is because of the current climate crisis. The climate crisis is caused, among many other factors, by the tendency of our civilisation to create boundaries between what is designated as “nature” and what is called “culture”. The old Cartesian dualism considers what is not human as part of nature (i.e. plants, animals, etc.) and believes in the superiority of culture over nature. Trees, plants in general and animals are seen as mere commodities which can be used for our needs and not as fellow creatures which have the same right to live on earth as humans do. However, in practice, humanity is not separated from the rest of the living beings on earth, on the contrary, it is deeply interconnected with them. Trees provide oxygen and shelter from the rain and the sun; some trees are historical landmarks are central elements of a human community. As a result, our actions affect our environment and a damaged environment becomes inhospitable for humans. Hence the need for our imaginary to evolve from a binary understanding of the world, to a conception of the world where every living being is connected, from plants to humans.

⁵ *Real Life* (2020)

⁶ It could also be argued that a preference to see the individual tree is anthropocentric. In fact, the concept of the individual is a human concept which negates the fact that trees are a part of a group and that they are interconnected by their roots.

The aim of this introduction is first to demonstrate the importance of trees and to briefly address the state of forests nowadays; it also seeks to show the importance of creating a new narrative in the time of the anthropogenic climate crisis: deforestation is in part the result of the Western philosophical traditions which considers that nature is separated from culture, when these two entities are in fact completely interconnected. A new narrative changing humans' perception of nature – i.e. from nature as a commodity to nature as a living thing with as much right to live on earth as humans – is crucial in our era, and this thesis studies how books try to create this new narrative.

2. Deforestation and Creating a New Narrative for our Relationship with Nature

However, our civilisation is still far from achieving this goal since deforestation is a major issue in the world. Deforestation is caused by logging for paper or furniture and structures made of wood, but also by “farming, grazing of livestock, mining, and drilling”, which, when “combined[,] account for more than half of all deforestation” (Nunez, 2019). Plantations of soy (which is used to feed livestock) and palm oil (used as a cheaper alternative to other vegetable oils) are greatly responsible for deforestation. Then there are wildfires as well, which can be unintentional, but aggravated by climate change; or intentional, in the aim of clearing the space to grow soy for example. The WWF reports that “we’re losing 18.7 million acres of forests annually, equivalent to 27 soccer fields every minute” (“Deforestation and Forest Degradation | Threats | WWF”, n.d.). The consequences of this massive deforestation are “increased greenhouse gas emissions” because trees store CO₂, which is released in the atmosphere when they are cut down; “disruption of water cycles” because trees are crucial components of the cycle of water; “increased soil erosion” when trees have been removed from an area and their roots no longer hold the soil together; and “disrupted livelihood”, i.e. the people who depend on forests' fruits to live, people who live in the forests and all the species which become endangered when their habitat is altered (“Deforestation and Forest Degradation | Threats | WWF”, n.d.). Reforesting the planet seems like an evident solution and it is cheap in fact, but it is not as simple as it may seem, and planting trees requires much more patience and time than cutting them down. Moreover, some cases of massive reforestation have proven to be more damaging than beneficial⁷ (Elbein, 2019). What is more, planting new forests can help

⁷ In Canada for example, scientists found that the 2016 Fort McMurray Fire had been extremely violent due to the fact that black spruce was planted on wetlands. Wetlands are resistant to wildfires, but the area was drained because of the plantation of the black spruce, thus increasing the intensity of the wildfires (Elbein, 2019).

diminish the carbon in the atmosphere but it should go hand in hand with the reduction of our carbon emissions, which in turn requires a major change in our approach when it comes to production and land use.

Such a description of the state of forests and deforestation might sound cold and factual, but it also helps us realize how dependent on forests human beings are. However, as said above, beyond considering forests as key for our survival, thinking of trees as living beings in their own rights would also benefit their preservation. If trees were dearer to us or if humans could be attached to trees, they would be more likely to be careful with deforestation. Companies like Ikea, which use 1% of the world's wood per year (Kelly, 2012) and its concept of cheap furniture, is not especially eco-friendly. Their low-quality furniture has a very short lifespan, which makes consumers buy more furniture in their lives than if they had bought sturdier furniture⁸. To help our civilisation progress in its use of materials and to move away from the Western philosophical tradition which considers animals and plants as inferior to humans, stories can be used as a way to promote and rethink our relationship with nature. The problem of massive deforestation will not be solved by books, but good stories have impacts on readers, like *L'arbre qui pleure*, which uses the cry as a tool to captivate the reader and to make them realise that the tree is not an object but a living being. Giulia Pacini, who studied the change of tree's place in the French imaginary between the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century, suggests that, in the face of the climate crisis, we need a new "myth" which will modify our relationship to nature (Pacini, 2016, p.194). This new narrative should show which we are part of a network composed of other living beings instead of clinging to a nature/culture boundary that separates humans from other creatures. Lawrence Buell also argues that fiction is an effective medium for absorbing new information and for inspiring readers:

Imaginative literature is best suited to engaging people intellectually *and* emotionally, providing them a greater personal stake in the text itself, and making them care. Fiction is frequently less didactic and more nuanced than nonfiction, delivering its messages by implication. Personal engagement minus didacticism equals inspiration (Dwyer, 2010, p.7).

Pacini also adds that it might feel overwhelming to try and connect to nature as a whole, but connecting to a specific tree in our garden or neighbourhood might be less intimidating and "a

⁸ Nevertheless, sturdier furniture also involves cutting older trees. A more ecological solution would then be a society which promotes the repairing furniture.

first step toward rethinking and rebalancing our relationship with the wider natural world” (Pacini, 2016, p.195).

This thesis is concerned with the ways particular contemporary books – two from America, one from Germany – deal with creating a human-tree bond but also reflect on the complexity and the limits of this task. If we take *L’arbre qui pleure* as an example, it can be seen that the writer uses anthropomorphism – i.e. projecting human features, behaviours or emotions onto other living beings and things – to bring the woodcutter and the people who use wood products unthinkingly closer to the trees in the forest, to make them realise that the trees are alive. In this master thesis I intend to analyse a corpus of literary works and discuss how these deal with the topic of deforestation and trees, how they try to portray a different way to interact with trees and the difficulties or conveying such a relationship. Before looking at the corpus in more detail, I will define the field to which this thesis belongs – ecocriticism.

3. *Ecocriticism*

The term “ecocriticism” was coined in the 1970s by William Rueckert (Dwyer, 2010, p.2) and designates the study of the relationship between the environment and literature. Before the late twentieth century, the environment was commonly analysed as a setting in literary criticism but never really involved “environmental history and the environmental and social sciences” (Buell, Heise and Thornber, 2011, p.418). In fact, environmental criticism is an interdisciplinary movement which considers different forms of art along with literature, and which includes findings of other human sciences as well as scientific findings. However, this later field is subject to criticism since science is sometimes identified as the source of the ecological crisis. Two distinct waves in the history of the ecocritical field are generally identified. The first wave began around the 1990s, involving researchers mainly from Anglo-Saxon countries, and is primarily concerned with nature writing and the local and regional environment. The second wave started in the years 2000s and is no longer solely the result of American or English research, but of research from various parts of the world with influential researchers such as Ursula K. Heise (German), or Dipesh Chakrabarty (Indian). Researchers of the second wave move beyond the study of the traditional genre of nature writing, and highlight the global nature of the climate crisis⁹. Researchers of the second wave highlight the global aspect of the climate.

⁹ Damages to the environment can be done locally but have global impacts. For instance, deforestation happening in the Amazonian forest increases CO₂ levels in the atmosphere globally, not only in Brazil – thus showing the importance of thinking globally of humans’ acts.

They are also concerned with including other domains of research (postcolonial studies, women studies or animal studies) and analyse the links between these domains and the environment. In addition, they also aim to rethink the nature/culture boundary rather than reiterate it in their analyses (Buell, Heise and Thornber, 2011, p.418-419). Ecocriticism is moved by the belief that “outside-the-box thought experiments” (Buell, Heise and Thornber, 2011, p.418) can help to create debates about environmental concerns and also to develop alternatives to our society (Buell, Heise and Thornber, 2011, p.418). Ecocriticism studies any work related to nature and our relationship with it, or to the climate crisis, whether it is a detail in a novel or a central theme. Literary works where the climate crisis is a central theme are called ecofictions. An ecofiction is, according to Jim Dwyer, “fiction that deals with environmental issues or the relation between humanity and the physical environment, that contrasts traditional and industrial cosmologies, or in which nature or the land has a prominent role” (Dwyer, 2010, p.2).

Studies on the plant world in ecocriticism is still minor. In fact, sub-categories stated in definitions of ecocriticism are for example “postcolonialism”, or “animals”, but there is no category for plants. Both Dwyer’s in *Where the Wild Books Are* (2010) and Buell, Heise and Thornber in “Literature and Environment” (2011), who define ecocriticism and its main research topics mention animal studies but do not refer to plants. Therefore, much of the study of plants is based on what has already been done in animal studies. Animal studies have greatly developed recently, and their relative popularity – in comparison to plants – could also be explained by the gap between human’s experience of the world and that of trees. Human and animals can move and have bodies which stop growing at some point in their lives, while plants are considered by people as mainly static and grow, make buds, lose leaves and change their appearance, although the life of plants is more complex than that. It has also been proven that certain animals suffer like humans, while the same cannot be said for trees. However, there is a noticeable growing interest in plants and trees, as can be seen with popularisation of concepts such as “crown shyness¹⁰”. This growing interest in the plant world is called the “plant turn”, which will be further defined in chapter one.

About the particular topic of trees in literature, there are specific studies, like Giulia Pacini’s for instance, but there are no systematic studies on trees in contemporary literature. However, several works of reference examine how the forest has been perceived through time like

¹⁰ The fact that the crowns of trees do not touch each other which, seen from under the canopy, makes a network pattern.

Forests. The Shadow of Civilization by Robert Pogue Harrison, and in the French-speaking world, the works of Andrée Corvol. Harrison's book examines how the forest has often been considered in literature as an antagonist to the Western civilisation. The forest has also been studied for their place in fairy tales like in *Gossip from the Forest* by Sara Maitland. Maitland's book demonstrates how fairy tales and the forest are interconnected, and nowadays, both threatened. These books are interesting because they examine how our beliefs about the forest can be found in literature. However, these books do not consider, like Pacini, the relationship humans can have with other living beings as equals; they are useful to understand humans' perception of forests, and where our stereotypes come from, but they do not give clues as to build a kinder relationship between trees and humans.

4. Corpus and research question

The chosen corpus is composed of a non-fiction book and two novels or ecofictions. First, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016) by Peter Wohlleben, originally written in German, explores the behaviour of trees, with a mix of scientific research as well as the author's observations during his work as a forest ranger. Second is *The Overstory* (2019), a novel by Richard Powers, which follows nine characters from different backgrounds in America, and their relationship to trees as they evolve in life. All the characters commit themselves at different levels to protecting trees. Finally, *Barkskins* (2017) by Annie Proulx follows two families over three hundred years of history and their link to deforestation – the Sel family is a poor, biracial (French and Mi'kmaq) family which cuts trees in lumber camps for a living, and the Dukes are a rich family who created an important lumber company in the United States. *Barkskins* is also a history of capitalism and how it treats nature and ethnic minorities.

The three books have been roughly published in the same period (2016, 2017 and 2019), they all share a concern for the climate crisis, and are all of course about trees but also about humans' perception of trees. They all are popular books: *The Overstory* has received several awards including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and both *The Overstory* and *The Hidden Life of Trees* have been translated in several languages; *Barkskins* has just been adapted into a series by National Geographic. The study is limited in the sense that the corpus is restricted to three books, and it cannot, as a consequence, establish general tendencies on trees in contemporary literature. What is more, one of the works of the corpus is a non-fiction book, making this study not strictly about ecofictions. But *The Hidden Life of Trees* is a good example of a book which

tries to rehabilitate the image nature and trees humans' minds and has thus been chosen on the base of this criterion.

Each book of the corpus and its own way of dealing with the topic of trees, deforestation and humans' relationship with nature is analysed in a separate chapter. Each book is also an opportunity to address various topics related to ecocriticism, such as the Anthropocene, anthropomorphism, posthumanism, vulgarisation, etc. More specifically, this master thesis looks at how these books represent or promote this human-tree relationship through stylistic figures and other literary techniques.

The three first chapters of this thesis each focus on one book from the corpus. Chapter one examines Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* as well as the gaps between humans' and trees' experience of the world and how publications of the plant turn try to reenchant science in order to reduce this gap. Chapter two analyses Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and explains how this maximalist novel tries to seek a balance between the representation of humans and that of trees. The novel also contains metafictional reflections on ecofictions and narratives which aim to change our perception of nature. Chapter three discusses Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*, and describes, within the fram of the naturalist novel, how capitalism treats ethnic minorities and nature. The last chapter summarises the findings of the previous three chapters and compares the three books as well as assesses how they deal with planetary scale and posthumanist considerations.

Chapter One: *The Hidden Life of Trees* and the Debate on Anthropomorphism

Science is not about control. It is about cultivating a perpetual condition of wonder in the face of something that forever grows one step richer and subtler than our latest theory about it. It is about reverence, not mastery

—Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

This first chapter analyses which particular literary mechanisms Peter Wohlleben uses in *The Hidden Life of Trees*, in order to bring humans to feel closer to trees. This thesis starts with the analysis of Wohlleben's non-fiction because his primary method is the use of anthropomorphic language – the showing or treating of animals, gods, and objects as if they are human in appearance, character or behaviour (“Anthropocentrism”, n.d.). Anthropomorphic language is an intuitive mechanism used by humans to understand the world of other living beings, and *The Hidden Life of Trees* can thus be seen as an attempt to copy our instinctive mechanisms of understanding the world and transfer it to the understanding of trees. Peter Wohlleben's book reflects a change in society's perception of plants called “the plant turn” – a recent interdisciplinary movement which uses scientific findings of the past decades about plants to reimagine plants' place in the world. *The Hidden Life of Trees* thus covers several introductory aspects of plants studies and of the instinctive mechanisms used to understand other living beings, while the two next chapters cover other literary mechanisms which are “less intuitive”.

The Hidden Life of Trees. What They Feel, How They Communicate. Discoveries from a Secret World, known as *Das geheime Leben der Bäume* in German, is a nonfiction book about trees and how these organisms behave, written by the German forest ranger Peter Wohlleben. This non-fiction is, on the one hand, the result of Wohlleben's observations and experience acquired during his career. As a forest ranger, Peter Wohlleben tends to the woods of Hummel, Germany, where originally, heavy machinery and chemicals were used to manage the forest, and trees were cut and sold as a source of profit. A few years ago, Wohlleben made his municipality transition to a more environmentally friendly forestry, which uses horses instead of machines and creates alternate ways to generate profit from the forest, without cutting trees down, such as workshops in the woods, or burials in the forest (McGrane, 2016). In addition, *The Hidden Life of Trees* is also a synthesis of the scientific research of the past decades on trees, but also

to a certain extent on plants in general, mushrooms, and animals. The book is written in an informal, emphatic and anthropomorphic language, in order to make scientific research available to lay people. It is structured in small chapters, each addressing a specific topic related to trees, among which: trees' connections with other trees or other living beings such as mushrooms and animals; how trees "decide" when it is the right moment to shed their leaves; how trees communicate the presence of predators. In other words, these different sections and topics aim to describe trees in a way that clearly invalidates stereotypes about plant immobility and passivity. This inclination to reconsider the belief that plants are passive and thus not worth of human's attention is a characteristic of publications such as *The Hidden Life of Trees*, which are part of the so-called "plant turn" movement. In fact, *The Hidden Life of Trees* is part of a body of works which seek to change our vision of nature and plants, i.e. not only considering trees as commodities for our needs, but rather and also, thinking of trees as fellow creatures with as much right to live on earth as humans have, and thus respecting their own ways of thriving.

In order to shift from a vision of trees and nature based on utilization to a more enchanted vision of nature, Wohlleben uses different kinds of mechanisms. Firstly, a rhetoric of awe and wonder at nature can be identified and linked to the 18th century and the Romantic movement; Wohlleben in fact often uses the words "magic" and "wonder" to refer to trees. Second, Wohlleben makes a heavy use of anthropomorphic language, such as in the sentence "Dozens of *offspring* from other years also stand at their *mothers' feet*" (Wohlleben, 2016, p.29, emphasis added) and many expressions which are not related to how the world of tree is actually behaving, scientifically speaking, but rather related to how humans behave. Anthropomorphism is much debated and highly contested by the scientific community but has the benefit of reaching a broader audience and making academic findings more accessible to lay people. *The Hidden Life of Trees* is in fact very popular amongst its readers – it has been translated in many languages – but less so in the academic world, to the extent that a petition was written against the publishing of *The Hidden Life of Trees*. A third mechanism used is the semantics of cooperation – Wohlleben's trees help each other – or of natural selection – Wohlleben often uses words which denote struggles or rivalry, which give the reader the impression that the trees are capable of movement, and as a result erases the idea of tree passivity.

The structure of this chapter is the following. The first section examines in more depth the plant turn and the challenges related to the particular modes of being of plants. Then, each following

section will address one of the literary mechanisms used by Peter Wohlleben to bridge the imaginary gap between humans and plants: the rhetoric of awe, anthropomorphism, and the use of the semantic field of cooperation and natural selection. In the last part, the limits of anthropocentrism, and its contrary, “antropodenial” as well as possible alternatives to these will be discussed.

1. *The Plant Turn*

As mentioned above, the plant turn designates a renewed interest in plants from authors of different backgrounds who use scientific findings of the past decades about plants to reimagine their place in the world. The plant turn is a corollary to the more established “animal turn”, which refers to a renewed interest in animals’ place and representation within the human sciences and led to the creation of the field of animal studies. As Harriet Ritvo explains, scholars of most of the branches of human sciences have progressively included animals in their research, adapting scientific works to the changes in society, similarly to how other movements had been included in academic research in the past. Such movements had formerly included women as an answer to the feminist movement, and the field of Women’ studies was later created; another approach emerged from the decolonisation movement, and led to including postcolonial considerations into research and in turn, to the establishment of postcolonial studies (Animals & Society Institute, 2019). Animal studies and the animal rights movement also aim to rethink our relationship with non-human animals and question on which moral basis animals can or cannot be used by humans, and more importantly, how we can simply live with animals without destroying the conditions to their lives. The animal turn and the plant turn are also non-anthropocentric or posthuman turns – both rejecting to conceive humans as central entity in the world (as opposed to plants or animals for example) – because they move away from a human perspective on the world. Peter Wohlleben makes some references to animal studies¹¹ in *The Hidden Life of Trees*, in order to establish a parallel with the evolution of animals’ status. The plant turn is an even greater challenge as a movement, as there is a greater gap between humans and plants than there is with animals:

I applaud these changes because we are now discovering that animals share many human emotions. And not just mammals, which are closely related to us, but even insects such as fruit flies. Researchers in California have discovered that even these tiny creatures might dream.

¹¹ The author also published a book on animals: *The Inner Life of Animals: Love, Grief, and Compassion: Surprising Observations of a Hidden World* (2017).

Sympathy for flies? That's quite a stretch for most people, and the emotional path to the forest is even more of a stretch. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.242)

Writings of the plant turn, says Natasha Myers, “encourage their readers to consider the extension of the concepts of intelligence, thought, communication, and cognition to plants, organisms that have hitherto seemed so passive, so mute, so still.” (Myers, 2015, p.40). *The Hidden Life of Trees* easily fits in this movement, since, as has been explained above, Wohlleben tries to open the reader's eyes on the complex life of trees and tries to erase the stereotype of trees as passive living beings. Like the animal turn, the plant turn makes people aware of the importance of plants, be it the sense that they play an important role in human life (as food, or for trees, as furniture or paper), but also in the sense that they are condition to the proper functioning of the earth (trees store CO₂, trees and other plants are food and shelter for animals and humans; they interact with creatures belonging to their ecosystem). And beyond thinking in terms of the usefulness of trees and plants, trees are forms or life in their own right.

However, as said Wohlleben at the end of *The Hidden Life of Trees*, the plant turn is more challenging than the animal turn. People have now assimilated the idea that animal are sentient beings, which have intellectual and social abilities very close to that of humans. Plants are certainly intelligent and can do many things, but they do not suffer in a way humans can relate to (a video of the treatment of animals in industrial farms will trigger a sense of disgust in the audience, while a video of trees being cut down might trigger sadness for the ecological consequences of deforestation, but it is less certain that it will trigger empathy for trees being cut). According to Michael Marder in “The Life of Plants and the Limits of Empathy” (2012), plants are different from humans/animals on two different levels. Ontologically, plants are mostly static – that is, in terms of human perception of the world; trees, as demonstrates Wohlleben, are much more dynamic, mobile and interconnected than people think – and they are not capable of proper movement, but they are not inanimate things either (Marder, 2012, p.262). Metaphysically, “as opposed to animals and humans, plants live without psychic interiority; they lack the metaphysical distinction between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ and do not set themselves in opposition to the environment that sustains them” (Marder, 2012, p.263). Marder adds that plants are “capable of registering stressful environmental stimuli and reacting at the level of biochemical changes in the cells of leaves and stems, [but] they do not suffer in the same way as sentient beings permeated by a network of nerves” (Marder, 2012, p.263). It thus more challenging for humans to relate to trees, and this is why the authors of the chosen

corpus need to compensate in a way or another to serve their aim of bringing trees closer to humans.

2. *Rhetoric of Wonder*

Peter Wohlleben uses a rhetoric of awe and wonder at nature, which has its origins in the Romantic movement (c. the end of the 18th century). This rhetoric is also used in *The Overstory*, where the sight of trees triggers mystical revelations and epiphanies. This aura of mystery starts with the title and the words “hidden” and “secret world”, and is prolonged by a foreword by Tim Flannery, an Australian scientist and environmentalist:

We read in fairy tales of trees with human faces, trees that can talk, and sometimes walk. This enchanted forest is the kind of place, I feel sure, that Peter Wohlleben inhabits. His deep understanding of the lives of trees, reached through decades of careful observation and study, reveals a world so astonishing that if you read his book, I believe that forests will become magical places for you, too. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.vii)

Flannery uses the word “magic” and promises, in a way, that this book will change our vision of trees. Flannery highlights the relationship between “careful observation”, i.e. scientific study, and the magical aspect of nature, stating indirectly that scientific study re-enchants our view of trees. The re-enchanting of nature is something, Myers argues, which is common to publications of the plant turn which “promise that your view of plants will forever be changed” (Myers, 2015, p.41). The forest is, what is more, not only a magical place, but it is something which Peter Wohlleben wants to preserve. When the German forest ranger tells the reader about the functioning of forests, he also explains how these processes are altered through climate change and what it means for humanity. He explains the roles of old growth forests in comparison with plantations of trees:

Whereas the old-growth forests offers soft, crumbly, humus-rich, and constantly moist soil for their delicate roots, European parks offer hard surfaces that have been depleted from nutrients and compacted after years of urbanization. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.170)

Peter Wohlleben states that this “book is a lens to help [us] take a closer look at what [we] might have taken for granted” (Wohlleben, 2016, p.xi). The reason why people take trees for granted is explained in the foreword by Flannery: “One reason that many of us fail to understand trees is that they live on a different time scale than us. One of the oldest trees on Earth, a spruce

in Sweden, is more than 9,500 years old. That's 115 times longer than the average human lifetime" (Wohlleben, 2016, p.vii). Because of this gap in our experience of life as trees and as humans, Wohlleben tries to draw our attention on trees with the use of a vocabulary oriented towards the semantic field of magic and wonder, and describes all the stages of trees' lives, the challenges they face and the very complex mechanics behind trees which involves other living beings such as insects and mushroom, in order to oppose the perceived stillness:

I encourage you to look around where you live. What dramas are being played out in wooded areas you can explore? How are commerce and survival balanced in the forests and woodlands you know? This book is a lens to help you take a closer look at what you might have taken for granted. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.x)

3. *Anthropomorphism*

The central way with which Wohlleben brings his readers close to trees is with the use of anthropocentric language. This is also what the scientific community mainly criticises about this non-fiction book. Some scholars claim Wohlleben has distorted scientific findings, and a petition was even published against his book:

We believe that this book is further proof of the sad situation that oversimplification and emotional explanations of complex matters are better received by a wide audience than factual information generated by thorough investigations. In the long-term, the environment in general and forests in particular will not be helped by the sort of unenlightened thinking promoted by the hidden reality of this book... This book cannot be classified as popular science. Instead claims are portrayed as facts which serve as a storyline that appeals to the mainstream. ("Even in the forest, it's facts we want instead of fairy tales - Online-Petition", n.d.)

Whether the facts stated are distorted or not, Peter Wohlleben uses an anthropomorphic language which is very much debated nowadays, and which is especially controversial in a non-fiction book about trees. Anthropocentric language has probably played a role in the wide audience which Wohlleben gained with his book – scientific language is arduous for most people – and this audience probably considers plants in a new light after reading *The Hidden Life of Trees*. However, scientists contest the use of this kind language because it can convey wrong information, such the suggestion that plants have emotions or have some kind of intentions or “agency” – i.e. the fact of doing purposeful acts. And from yet another point of

view, posthumanists regret that the use of human-derived language makes it impossible to truly think beyond the human, and that anthropocentric language erases what is specific to plants or animals, and thus indirectly states that what is different from humans is inferior (Myers, 2015, p.39).

Anthropomorphism is rooted in our desire to understand the world, and the parts of it – non-human animals and plants – which cannot use language in order to describe their vision of the world (Brown, 2015), which we thus have to interpret. As has been said, Wohlleben uses many anthropomorphic comparisons between trees and humans. Here are some examples:

Even in a forest, there are loners, would-be hermits who want little to do with others. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.10)

The tree on the right is a bit more anxious than the others, or to put it more positively, more sensible. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.152)

Beeches, spruce, and other species certainly find blue sky, which means lots of sun, equally agreeable. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.227)

These examples among many others are representative of the language used in Wohlleben's non-fiction book, and how it is anthropomorphic: "loner" trees do not conceptualise that they do not want to socialise with other trees; trees do not have emotions and therefore cannot be "anxious" (Wohlleben often nuances his language in the book, after having stated something very anthropocentric, as he does it in this sentence); trees do not have opinions about what is agreeable or not. Yet, it can be noted that, even if Peter Wohlleben's use of language is clearly human-centred, it is still connected to the way trees actually behave, making this a milder use of anthropocentrism. A "stronger" form of anthropocentric language can be found, for example, in children's books, where trees can talk, fall in love or go on vacation.

Anthropomorphism can be the reflection of different factors. It can simply be triggered by ignorance, by not knowing what has already been established by science about certain species. For instance, the bared-teeth display of chimpanzees can be thought to be a smile by some, when it is in fact a sign of stress and fear (Sueur, 2017), something which has already been established by science. Anthropomorphism can also be caused by a lack of data, where one is forced to interpret the behaviour of a living being in order to try and understand its behaviour

(Sueur, 2017). In Wohlleben's case, the reason for his use of anthropocentrism is not caused by ignorance: he either uses anthropomorphic language to simplify the scientific language (the examples seen above), or tries to interpret his own observations and extrapolate on findings; for example, in chapter two ("The Language of Trees") where he tries to demonstrate that trees have the same five senses as humans have.

Cédric Sueur (2017) identifies different types of anthropomorphisms. First off, anthropomorphism can be divided into two main branches: the imaginative type and the interpretative type. Imaginative anthropomorphism is the one where animals, plants, and objects embody an aspect of human life, a personality trait as in the 17th century *Fables* by La Fontaine. For example, in the famous "The Crow and the Fox", the crow represents an easily flattered person and the fox a cunning one. The imaginative type of anthropomorphism is also found in animated movies and books for kids, where animals are sometimes dressed up as humans or speak like them. In the case of trees, one example is Grandmother Willow from the Disney movie *Pocahontas*, a willow tree which has the face of an old woman and gives advice to the protagonist. The other branch, "interpretative anthropomorphism", is a day-to-day life act of interpreting what a particular behaviour could mean, as explained above. This can be linked to the two aforementioned levels of anthropocentrism: the milder version would be the interpretative anthropomorphism, and the stronger one can be associated with the imaginative anthropomorphism (which does not follow any realistic traits of the actual animal or plants they are representing).

Sueur (2017) distinguishes other types of anthropomorphism within this second branch, one of which is the "species anthropomorphism", which has the benefit to identify that people do not interpret behaviours in the same way according to the species they are analysing, whether the species is a dog or a fly, a chimpanzee or a spider. Trees, like insects in the realm of animals, do not physically resemble humans, and so it is rarer, in everyday life, to anthropomorphise trees as a means to understand their behaviour. Even if we do not spontaneously use anthropomorphic language to make sense of plants' world – because we have difficulties finding points of comparison – Peter Wohlleben still uses anthropomorphism in order to show that in fact, trees and humans are not that different, and that they share many things in common.

4. *Natural Selection, Mutual Aid and Agency*

Another rhetoric related to anthropomorphism which serves Wohlleben's aim, is the use of the semantic field of combat. The section title "Yours or mine" (translated in French as "Rapport de force") expresses this sense of competition which Wohlleben describes in *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Even if it is not as visible as for animals, there is a sense of fight for survival, and the chances to grow old for trees, Wohlleben says, are scarce. The chapter "The Tree Lottery" explains how of the millions of seeds produced by a tree, only one will become a tree. Later in the book, he explains that even small trees might not survive to grow taller, because, for example, older trees might not die in time and leave a space in the canopy for the small tree to grow – if these older trees do not fall on the small trees and ruin their chances altogether. Here are some examples that convey this idea of vulnerability and struggle, and the fight for life:

I am most familiar with the struggles and strategies of beeches and oaks, and with the contrast between deciduous forests that plan their own futures and coniferous forests planted for commercial gain (Wohlleben, 2016, p.x)

After the fight for light, it is the fight for water that finally decides who wins (Wohlleben, 2016, p.49)

Although many species of tree fight each other mercilessly above ground and even try to crowd out each other's root systems, the fungi that populate them seem to be intent on compromise. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.53)

Anxious suckers sprouting at the base of the trunk are a dead giveaway. These spindly tufts of growth ring the tree and usually quickly wither away. They indicate that the tree is engaged in an extended fight to the death, and it is panicking. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.68)

What looks harmonious above ground turns out to be the beginning of a fight for survival below the surface. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.69)

It goes without saying that constant struggle and rapid growth exact their toll. After the first three decades, exhaustion sets in. The topmost branches, a yardstick for the vitality of pioneer tree species, thin out. That in itself wouldn't be too worrisome, but trouble is brewing under the poplars, birches, and willows. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.184)

These citations clearly try to invalidate the stereotype of tree passivity, they indicate that “below the surface” – as the fifth citation puts it – something complex is happening. The idea of struggle helps giving movement to the tree, an idea of action which is contradictory to the belief that trees are passive.

As much as Peter Wohlleben stresses the fight for survival among the lives of trees, echoing the famous Darwinian theory of evolution and the ensuing survival of the fittest, he also emphasises mutual aid, without which, he claims, trees would not survive. The concept of mutual aid is explained in *L'Entraide* (2019) by Pablo Servigne and Guillaume Chapelle. The title is chosen in reference to the Russian geographer and anarchist Peter Kropotkine who wrote in 1902 *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, where he demonstrates that living beings tend to help each other when in hostile environments. The authors in the book want to emphasise how mutual aid in nature is as common as aggression and selfishness. They explain the need to highlight mutual aid as follows:

If the economic, political and social climate deteriorates rapidly, our imagination, fed by this monoculture of competition, will always produce the same story: war of all against all, preventive aggressiveness [...] While another scenario, that of cooperation, could just as well emerge... if we include it in the field of possibilities!¹² (Servigne & Chapelle, 2019, p.23)

Throughout the book, they thus stress how inherent mutual aid is in all living beings' lives, and at the end of the book, they come to formulate this conclusion:

Natural selection is [...] a balance between two forces. The first acts within a group and tends to favour the most able-bodied individuals, which often equates to the most selfish or aggressive. This force causes conflicts within groups: it is described as disruptive. The second force acts from outside the groups and tends to favour groups made up of more cooperative, even altruistic individuals, because they make the group as a whole more effective¹³. Servigne and Chapelle, 2019, p.239).

¹² « Si le climat économique, politique et social se dégrade rapidement, notre imaginaire, lui, gavé de cette monoculture de la compétition, produira toujours la même histoire : la guerre de tous contre tous et l'agressivité préventive [...] Alors qu'un autre scénario, celui de la coopération, pourrait tout aussi bien émerger... si tant est que nous l'incluons dans le champ des possibles ! » (Servigne & Chapelle, 2019, p.23, *my translation*)

¹³ « La sélection naturelle est donc un équilibre entre deux forces. La première agit à l'intérieur d'un groupe et tend à favoriser les individus les plus aptes, ce qui équivaut souvent aux plus égoïstes ou aux plus agressifs. Cette force provoque des conflits au sein des groupes : elle est qualifiée de perturbatrice. La deuxième agit de

Servigne and Chapelle (2019) demonstrate how mutual aid is as instinctive as aggressivity and that, in all the realms of the living beings: plants, animals, and mostly humans. They admit however that the choice of the word “mutual aid” has an anthropocentric connotation: “We have chosen the term *mutual aid*, knowing [...] that it can sometimes imply a touch of anthropomorphism, especially when it comes to describing the behaviours of living beings that are nothing like us¹⁴” (Servigne and Chapelle, 2019, p.27).

Even if altruism in plants can be explained by evolutionary causes and benefits, and is thus as common in humans as it is in plants, the language of mutual aid and struggle make Wohlleben’s tree characters livelier. The difference of timescale between humans and trees is almost erased by this use of language since it seems that trees are able to respond quickly since it is said that they fight back. In *The Hidden Life of Trees*, trees are as quick to respond, to fight back or to help, as humans are. It feels as if trees have agency and the conscious will to help other trees. The idea of trees fighting for their place in the forest gives them movement– and the vocabulary of mutual aid gives them endearing traits. Wohlleben says: “I observed how hard the beeches fought and, amazingly enough, how some of them survive to this day.” (Wohlleben, 2016, p.18) And the fact that he describes himself seeing the beeches fight really gives the impression of trees moving. However, “to this day” suggests that he is able to see trees struggle because he has been observing them every day for years, thus nuancing again this use of language.

Anthropomorphism and the semantic field of mutual aid and natural selection thus give agency to trees. Agency is part of the debate on anthropomorphism: anthropomorphic language uses words which convey the idea of purposeful actions and make animals/plants look as if plants or animals are doing conscious actions. Fred I. Dretske in his article on agency says that: “Purposeful acts ... are behaviors governed by thought. Such acts are an expression of agency. Every living thing behaves, but only agents act” (Dretske, 1999, p.20). The author explains that evolution is the reason why plants have certain behaviours. He takes the example of the Scarlet Gilia, a flower which changes colour at some point in the year to attract pollinators. Dretske explains that this behaviour of changing colour is due to some biological clock, acquired

l’extérieur des groupes et tend à favoriser les groupes constitués d’individus plus coopératifs, voire altruistes, car ils rendent le collectif globalement efficace ». (Servigne and Chapelle, 2019, p.239, *my translation*)

¹⁴ « Nous avons choisi le terme d’entraide, conscients qu’il n’a pas la même définition pour tous, et qu’il peut parfois impliquer une touche d’anthropomorphisme, surtout lorsqu’il s’agit de décrire les comportements d’êtres vivants qui ne nous ressemblent en rien. » (Servigne and Chapelle, 2019, p.27, *my translation*)

through years and years of evolution, which favoured plants which changed colours, and is not due to a purposeful act. He thus condemns authors which could say the plant changes colour “in order to” attract pollinator because it is the evolutive system which makes the plant change colour (Dretske, 1999, p.26). According to this paper, Peter Wohlleben would then convey a wrong idea in his non-fiction book, as the petition published by scholars suggested. Peter Wohlleben is not shy about giving agency to trees, since he states it directly in the beginning of *The Hidden Life of Trees*:

Of course, it makes sense to ask whether tree roots are simply wandering around aimlessly underground and connecting up when they happen to bump into roots of their own kind. Once connected, they have no choice but to exchange nutrients. They create what looks like a social network, but what they are experiencing is nothing more than a purely accidental give and take. In this scenario, chance encounters replace the more emotionally charged image of active support, though even chance encounters offer benefits for the forest ecosystem. But Nature is more complicated than that. According to Massimo Maffei from the University of Turin, plants—and that includes trees—are perfectly capable of distinguishing their own roots from the roots of other species and even from the roots of related individuals. (Wohlleben, 2016, p.3)

Wohlleben’s language is no doubt anthropocentric and gives more intention and thus more agency to trees than what has been proven by science. However, science is also very restrictive in the agency it gives to trees, simply because what has not been proven yet cannot be claimed. When Wohlleben uses anthropomorphic language, it is in order to illustrate in a simple manner some complex mechanisms, but also to free trees from a scientific language which can sometimes alienates them and also alienates lay people from understanding their surroundings.

5. The Limits of Anthropomorphism and Anthropodenial

The Hidden Life of Trees calls to our emotions when it describes trees as struggling, suffering, loving and helping creatures. It thus bases its ethics of trees on our empathy. Marder, who studied the gaps between humans/animals’ experience of the world and plants, says plants “embod[y] limits to empathy” (Marder, 2012, p.260). Marder claims that, since there is such a gap in our way of being in the world, and that empathy “presupposes ... the substantial sameness of the empathizer and the empathized with”, people cannot really feel empathy for plants. Thus, when one thinks they empathise with plants, in reality, they demonstrate empathy

with themselves: “a presumably sensitive ethical approach veers on the side of instrumentalization, in that it uses the plant as a means for personal catharsis and an outlet for the content of bad conscience” (Marder, 2012, p.263).

It could be said that Wohlleben projects his own thoughts and emotions on trees, and thus erases a part of trees’ specificity. His reduction of the gap is made by the “sacrificing” of a part the plants’ world. One example of that in *The Hidden Life of Trees* is in chapter two, where Peter Wohlleben tackles recent findings about trees’ way to communicate. Trees send chemicals when they are being attacked by certain predators, to “warn” other trees around of the danger. These trees can thus produce a chemical substance that will repulse the predator if it tries to come to them. Peter Wohlleben goes on to say that trees have the sense of taste, since they can detect the saliva of the predator and react accordingly. Wohlleben then tries to identify other senses in trees: “What about sounds? Let’s get back to hearing and speech” (Wohlleben, 2016, p.12). He then goes on to explain an experiment: “Whenever the seedlings’ roots were exposed to a crackling at 220 hertz, they oriented their tips in that direction. That means the grasses were registering this frequency, so it makes sense to say they ‘heard’ it” (Wohlleben, 2016, p.13). And so, Wohlleben tries to find any evidence that trees might have, like humans and animals in general, five senses. However, the fact that trees have the capacity to send chemicals into the air to “help” other trees is fascinating enough, there is thus, I believe, no need here to add that this might be linked with our capacity to taste. It reduces trees to a similarity with humans, while the act of sending chemicals is in fact something humans cannot do.

Nevertheless, Wohlleben’s attempt to find five sense in trees can also be seen as a way to show his readers that trees are actually way more complex than what they tend to believe. an alternatives to anthropocentrism are challenging to find. Moreover, to remove all anthropocentrism from the study of animals or plants would lead to the opposite problem, called “anthropodenial” by de Waal (Bruni, Perconti & Plebe, 2018, p.6). An unrestricted use of anthropocentrism completely erases specificities of other species, but anthropodenial is as problematic since it does not allow animals or plants any intelligence or agency. This same idea is expressed in *The Overstory* by scientist Patricia Westerford:

We scientists are taught never to look for ourselves in other species. So we make sure nothing looks like us! Until a short while ago, we didn’t even let chimpanzees have consciousness, let

alone dogs or dolphins. Only man, you see: only man could know enough to want things. (Powers, 2019, p.567).

The fact is that we might not have a better solution than anthropomorphism as a way of making bonds with other species. Since “the feeling of empathy toward other animals is often driven by an anthropomorphic stance ...[,] human empathy is usually about vertebrates, especially mammals, as they have similar physical features to human.” (Bruni, Perconti & Plebe, 2018, p.4) Trees on the other hand look nothing like us, but if an author like Peter Wohlleben seeks to make links with our human experience of life through anthropomorphic language, readers might have more empathy for trees and relate to them. Marder warns that empathy towards plants might mean erasing the plant specificity, since we are not able to understand what the plant’s experience of the world is, and that we might end up projecting our own emotions and systems of thought on it. However, as said earlier, anthropomorphism in this book is still mild, and used for vulgarisation which serves the aim of reaching a large audience, in order to change the world’s perception of trees as passive or uninteresting beings, and ultimately to have an ethics which can protect plants better. Anthropocentrism’s speciesist way of negating what makes a plant different from a human, could be seen, in our case, as a form of “strategic essentialism”. The phrase was coined by Spivak and is defined as “a political tactic employed by a minority group acting on the basis of a shared identity in the public arena in the interests of unity during a struggle for equal rights.” (“Strategic Essentialism”, n.d.) In the end, even if we agree that anthropocentrism denies some part of the plant’s being, this compromise with an anthropocentric language can lead to a more sustainable relationship with plants.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the plant turn presents specific challenges, since the gap between humans’ perception of life and that of trees is caused by a different mode of being and functioning than humans and animals. Throughout this chapter, it has been demonstrated that Peter Wohlleben tries in *The Hidden Life of Trees* to bring his tree characters to life through different mechanisms such as a rhetoric of wonder at nature, but also a strong use of anthropocentric language and the semantics of natural selection and mutual aid. Although the use of anthropocentric language is strongly debated, it has been shown that Peter Wohlleben primarily uses it to highlight trees and vulgarise science about trees in order to change our perception of nature. A book trying to get rid of anthropocentrism altogether might not have as much of an audience as *The Hidden Life of Trees*, and might thus not succeed in its goal of

changing humans' behaviour toward nature. With this use of anthropocentric language, Wohlleben manages to break the stereotype of the passive trees and creates empathy through the anthropomorphic comparison. In the next chapter, the analysis of *The Overstory* shows some similarities with *The Hidden Life of Trees*' approach to trees and also reveals some other literary mechanisms which show the interconnection of humans and trees.

Chapter Two: *The Overstory* and the Maximalist Novel: Finding a Balance Between Human and Tree Representation

You're studying what makes some people take the living world seriously when the only real thing for everyone else is other people. You should be studying everyone who thinks that only people matter

—Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

After having analyzed a non-fiction book in the previous chapter, the analysis of *The Overstory* (2019) by Richard Powers gives an opportunity to distinguish what a novel (here, an ecofiction), does differently than a non-fiction work, especially when these two books share some similarities. In fact, both books share the same rhetoric of wonder at nature: Peter Wohlleben often comments on the beauty and complexity of the forest, and the characters of *The Overstory* have some kind of mystical or animistic link with trees. After going through life-changing events, most of the characters of *The Overstory* have a kinder relationship to trees, which echoes with the kind of human-tree relationship Wohlleben pleads for in his book. But *The Overstory* is more than *The Hidden Life of Trees*, in fact, it *contains* Peter Wohlleben's non-fiction work. In this ecofiction, a character named Patricia Westerford writes non-fiction books about trees and her reflections on her writings strongly resembles Peter Wohlleben's own project. She is a scientist, who writes non-fiction books about trees, and is torn between her animistic relationship with nature, and the academical code which does not allow her to write about her intuitions about trees; she also uses anthropomorphic language in order to inform a broader audience about trees through her books.

Yet, Patricia Westerford and the similarities with *The Hidden Life of Trees* is only a small part of what is *The Overstory*. In fact, there are eight other characters in the novel, all of them representing another angle on the matter of trees or issues related to them: art is represented by the character called Nicholas Hoel, human psychology in green activism is addressed by the story of Adam Appich; rights and law are dealt with through the character Ray Brinkman. The novel is thus very rich in terms of the different takes its polyphonic structure allows. It is also very varied in terms of the references cited throughout the narrative: the intertext is abundant with citations and allusions to works of art, poetry and novels; to scientists and great thinkers; to different mythologies and religions. It seems as if Powers' novel is an attempt to make the

novel equal in terms of information as a non-fiction book or tries to mimic an encyclopedia. *The Overstory* is a small world, almost an ecosystem, a balanced universe where there is a representative of (almost) everything.

The length of the book, as well as its polyphonic aspect, the encyclopedic project and other characteristics of *The Overstory* which will be discussed further in this chapter, form together the characteristics of the maximalist novel. *The Overstory* is a maximalist novel because it contains many characters, is quite lengthy and also quotes or alludes to a varied range of works and personalities. A maximalist novel is also structured by two opposite poles: “the cosmos-function” and the “the chaos-function”. The characters come under the chaos-function and the omniscient narrator which tells the story throughout is part of the cosmos-function. I believe that these two opposite poles are also a way for the author to point out two different ways of discussing the climate crisis. In this search for mechanisms which could bring trees closer in our imaginary, it can also be noted that in *The Overstory*, the life of the human characters are deeply entangled with that of trees, and it is done through the use of metaphors, but also by more structural elements which will be defined later in this chapter. Finally, Patricia Westerford is particularly interesting to study since her character reflects on the difficulties of writing non-fiction about trees, the differences between the scientific community, the lay people who read her books, and her dilemmas about vulgarization.

This chapter is structured as follows. The first part analyses in more detail the characteristics of the maximalist novel and how *The Overstory* fits into this category, and also what it means for an ecofiction to be a maximalist novel. In the following sections, I detail the opposition between the narrator and the characters which is related to chaos/cosmos function of the maximalist novel and used in this ecofiction to represent two “schools of thought” regarding discourses around the climate crisis. Then the analysis is narrowed down on the literary mechanisms used by Richard Powers to imagine a more connected way to live with trees and more respectful attitudes towards these other beings. The final section focuses on the character of Patricia Westerford, which concentrates many aspects of the novel and reflects on the ecofiction and its challenges.

1. *The Maximalist Novel*

Powers, with his “totalising” novel can be considered as a maximalist novel, according to the characteristics identified by Stefano Ercolino in his study of this genre. Ercolino identifies ten characteristics representative of the maximalist novel: “length, encyclopedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narratorial omniscience, paranoid imagination, inter-semiocity, ethical commitment, and hybrid realism” (Ercolino, 2012, p.242). It is not the aim of this chapter to determine if *The Overstory* is strictly speaking a maximalist novel by analysing systematically how the novel fits in the different characteristics established by Ercolino. However, Ercolino’s definition of the maximalist novel is helpful to identify to which literary tradition Powers belongs, and what it reveals of his project. Some of the characteristics do not really coincide: the “paranoid imagination” (which has to do with “hypothetical threats”, conspiracies, etc.), and the hybrid realism (novels with grotesque characters, for example) do not apply to *The Overstory*. Powers’ novel is not maximalist in the sense of *The Crying of Lot 49* by Pynchon: the characters are not grotesque; the narration is not chaotic.

Overall, *The Overstory* corresponds to the other characteristics cited above. It is lengthy (625 pages) and undoubtedly holds an encyclopedic aspect. One salient aspect of *The Overstory*, as said earlier, is in fact its rich intertext. References include names of personalities who have dealt with trees in their works: poets like Whitman, Rumi; scientists like Muir; thinkers like Thoreau; authors like Ovid. Mythological and religious characters like Cyparissus and Vishnu are also cited. In addition to these names, there are references to titles of books about trees, fiction or non-fiction, like *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss and Peattie’s *Natural Histories*, and also entire excerpts and quotations. These references serve to address trees through the lens of different disciplines. Trees are a matter of biology and biodiversity and can thus raise scientific questions such as “how do trees work?”, “what relationships do they have with other living things?”, “what are the consequences of massive logging?”. Societal questions are also addressed: “why do only a few of us act in the face of climate change?”, “why is the law not protecting crucial elements of ecosystems like river and forests?”. All these intertextual elements already give that totalising sense of the maximalist novel, since a world of reference is contained in one novel.

Another maximalist characteristic is the “diegetic exuberance” which refers to the polyphonic aspect of the story (several characters with their own voices and their own story), which makes the narrative complex and intricate because it follows the lives of these nine characters

parallelly. Next, the “narratorial omniscience” serves, in this maximalist novel, to bring order to the exuberance of the narrative. There is in fact a very intrusive omniscient narrator in *The Overstory*, which highlights his knowledge about botany and other topics. The knowledge of the narrator contrasts with the relative ignorance of the characters about technical terms about trees and plants. Another characteristic is the “ethical commitment” which refers to novels dealing with “themes of great historical, political, and social relevance” (Ercolino, 2012, p.252). *The Overstory* fits this definition, since it deals with deforestation, but also with other historical events in the background such as immigration, the Vietnam war or the Stanford prison experiment.

Ercolino organises some of his 10 characteristics in an “internal dialectic” which is divided into two opposed and complementary poles: the “chaos-function” and the “cosmos-function” (Ercolino, 2012, p.250). “Length, encyclopedic mode, dissonant chorality, and diegetic exuberance, on the one hand; completeness, narratorial omniscience, and paranoid imagination, on the other” (Ercolino, 2012, p.250). The chaos-function is associated with anarchy, while the cosmos-function orders the novel. “These antithetical forces guarantee the maximalist novel's system-genre its delicate equilibrium, an equilibrium indispensable to its fundamental symbolic need to represent the complexity of the world in which we live.” (Ercolino, 2012, p.251). This balance is in fact something which can be noticed throughout the novel: there is a balance between the omniscient knowledge of the narrator and the imperfect knowledge of the characters; there is also balance in how trees and humans are represented; within the character of Patricia Westerford, animistic beliefs and scientific rigour have equal importance. *The Overstory* is a closed and complete world, where every character is supposed to represent a facet of life, where the intertext seems almost exhaustive in terms of references about trees. The association of the maximalist novel with the ecofiction novel allows ecofiction to have a certain balance between a discourse that is perhaps too didactic (represented in the text by the omniscient narrator and the extensive intertext) and a discourse that is too emotional/impulsive (represented by the characters).

2. The Omniscient Narrator and the Human Characters: a Balance Between Facts and Emotions

In this opposition, the two poles can be seen as metaphors for two different reactions that our society may have vis-à-vis the climate crisis: the omniscient narrator is the factual, scientific approach to the world and climate change, while the characters are mainly driven by their emotions.

The narrator comments on the events and shares his knowledge when he has the opportunity to do so. He also draws the reader's attention on the ignorance of the characters. He says for example: "Staring at the bottom of the apple's core, he realizes that the calyx – a word he'll never know in this life – is nothing less than the leftover bits of a withered appel flower". (Powers, 2018, p.312). The narrator clearly states his presence: he is narrating what the character sees, but, as it seems, cannot help commenting on the character's lack of knowledge in botany; he specifies that the word he has just elicited, "calyx", does not come from the character Ray Brinkman (he does not know the term and will never know it), but from himself. Had the narrator not mentioned it between dashes, the ignorance of the characters would have remained unnoticed. The narrator seems to highlight a superiority of his, which is perhaps self-evident for an omniscient narrator, often described as a presence which knows everything and which is above the world of the characters. Nonetheless, this narrator emphasizes his superiority more than a prototypical omniscient narrator, and by contrast, stresses the characters' ignorance. The loss of authority that the novel has to face nowadays, in part due to the rise of the new media (Dawson, 2009, p.150), is interestingly linked with the return of the omniscient narrator in Paul Dawson's article. Dawson argues that the omniscient narrator is one "defense" mechanism against this loss of influence power of the novel, and it is probably even more so in the climate crisis context (Dawson, 2009, p.150).

This knowledgeable narrator stands in opposition with the characters. The fact that the narrator emphasises his knowledge, and especially in botany, makes the reader re-think his own knowledge in the light of the ignorance of the character. Linked to the many references and the pedagogical or "preachy" aspect of the book that some have criticized (Sam Jordison, 2018a, 2018b), the narrator is an element – alongside with the rich intertext – which forces the reader to assess what he knows about botany and trees. Even so, it is not because the narrator is influencing the reader to see the characters as ignorant (in terms of botany and trees), that the characters themselves do not have their own "power". What leads them to defend what they

cherish – trees – is not knowledge – they do know vaguely what is happening – but what leads them to take action is rather their emotions. Olivia is guided by “beings of light” that tell her where to go and what to do; Nicolas Hoel is in love with Olivia and follows her; Douglas is angry to realise that the company for which he plants apple trees is also responsible for deforestation; Mimi is also angry because the trees behind her office reminded her of her father and have been cut. One notices of course that the story does not end well for the green activists: two of them go to prison for terrorism, two others go into hiding, and one dies.

The narrator and characters are however not only opposed poles, but could also be a metaphor for a need of balance between scientific facts and emotions in communication about climate change. On the one hand, scientific reports are based on facts and numbers which fail to involve a broad audience. Roeser argues in *Risk Communication, Public Engagement, and Climate Change: A Role for Emotions* (2012) that facts and numbers about climate change do not affect people, mostly because the threat is distant in place or time. Instead, emotions can trigger action more easily. Roeser says: “complex statistics can be replaced or supplemented by understandable, gripping narratives” (Roeser, 2012, p.1036). The narrator, his scientific knowledge and the learned aspect of *The Overstory* are balanced by the nine characters who often act according to their emotions.

Nevertheless, the emotional reaction of the characters is not approved of, since the story of the activists turns sour. *The Overstory* might be suggesting another take on the climate crisis, which could be linked with Caren Irr’s article “Ecotoxicism, or Notes on Franzen” (2018). Irr suggests a new approach to the ecological crisis, i.e. ecotoxicism, which she considers as an alternative to several types of discourses that address the climate crisis, such as nihilism, apocalyptic discourses or more “practical” views which promote activism. Ecotoxicism is another option, which acknowledges the climate crisis but accepts that complex ecological problems take time to be “solved” and is against impulsive emotional reactions. This concept, says Caren Irr, can be applied to various literary works and is quite malleable. Irr cites *The Overstory* as another example of ecotoxicism. *The Overstory* does have a tendency to underline the slow evolution of time from the point of view of trees and to emphasize the vulnerability of humanity. Mystical revelations and other moments of contemplation promote an interconnection between humans and trees, and a more tender way of looking at one's environment.

3. *Human and Trees Interconnected*

Powers uses many literary techniques to bring readers closer to trees, but not in one way as in *The Hidden Life of Trees*, where trees are compared to humans but not the other way around. Even if we mainly follow human characters, Powers seems to balance humans' centrality in stories and remind the reader that these human characters are embedded in a world of trees. The first example of this is the structure of the book, which is separated in four sections, each named after a particular part of a tree's anatomy: "Roots", "Trunk", "Crown" and "Seeds". The book, it seems, is a tree in which the characters live. This is also embedded in some way in the fact that the novel is made of paper which comes from a tree, so the characters can only be a part of a tree. Moreover, each character is presented in the first part of the book, "Roots", in distinct chapters. Each character is linked in this first part of the novel to one tree: Nicholas Hoel is linked to the chestnut tree planted by one of his ancestors; in Adam Appich's family, a tree is planted for every newborn, and Adam's parents plant a Maple tree for him; Douglas Pavlicek's life is saved by a banyan tree after he falls off a plane during the Vietnam war; Neelay Metha falls from an oak tree ("encinas") and remains paralyzed after the accident. The characters would not have had the same lives without these experiences. Some characters go through life-changing events or near-death experiences, like Neelay Metha, but some just have a link with a tree that is dear to them: Mimi Ma for example loves the mulberry tree of her father, and the death of the tree comes as a loss; late in their lives Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly enjoy determining which species grow in their garden. The religious themes of death and rebirth are very important themes in *The Overstory*; many secondary characters die as if to underline the ephemeral aspect of human lives. But characters are also reborn, such as Olivia Vandergriff who is literally reborn after having been electrocuted and hears "beings of light" who tell her what she should do. Other characters are reborn in other ways: Patricia Westerford wants to commit suicide, but she decides not to in the last moment and after this decision her life changes; Nicholas Hoel starts a new life when he meets Olivia; Adam Appich has a revelation reading the fictional book *The Ape Inside Us*. These revelations in their lives will intensify their already existing links with nature and they will all become active in the protection of trees at different levels: five characters are green activists which occupy land to stop deforestation (Olivia, Nicholas, Mimi, Douglas and Adam), Patricia writes non-fiction books and collects seeds of trees around the world, Neelay develops the complexity of the flora of his video games; Ray and Dorothy refuse to prune the vegetation in their garden and to mow the lawn.

The level of the narrative is not the only one where the characters are linked to trees. The level of the sentence also shows some close association between humans and trees. In the previous chapter, the anthropomorphic language was the main literary mechanism used in *The Hidden Life of Trees* to make trees look more like humans and thus make them more interesting. Trees are in *The Overstory* sometimes anthropomorphized: “The seeds are humming. They’re *singing* something - she’d swear it - just below earshot.” (Powers, 2019, p.486) But humans are also vegetalised: some metaphors such as the ones below compare humans to trees/plants and not the other way around:

Time was not a line unrolling in front of her. It was a column of concentric circles with herself at the core and the present floating outward all along the outermost ring (Powers, 2019, p.43)

Meaning drains from her like green from a maple in fall (Powers, 2019, p.127)

All her flowers have long since faded. But here's the bee (Powers, 2019, p.143)

Clumsy and green, they peel back the shields of clothing. Ten minutes later, she’s turned into a tree just a little too late to be spared” (Powers, 2019, p.152)

4. Patricia Westeford

Patricia Westerford is the figure of the author within the character world. Being embodied (partly) in one character allows the author to conduct a metafictional discourse, namely, on writing about trees in the climate crisis era. Patricia Westerford is not only a scientist, but is also a non-fiction writer – she publishes two books about trees in her life. It can be noticed that her books put her in a position of authority: she is called to court to testify about trees’ importance, and is also a public figure giving conferences. Her books give trees more visibility, but she also has to lie, transform or vulgarize what she knows to reach a greater audience. From the beginning of her chapter, in the section “Roots”, Patricia is already associated to the author: she is described as the “guiding spirit of a kingdom” (Powers, 2019:141). A kingdom composed of her dolls, made of materials found in her garden, like acorns and pinecones. Like an author who gives life to their characters, Patricia gives life to her handmade beings.

Other characters also have features of the author, or also contain in their stories metafictional reflections about trees in literature; Powers acknowledged in an interview with the Guardian

that he created “several characters all of whom have a claim to being my alter ego” (Preston, 2019). Nicholas Hoel shares with the author a journey in the field of art and Neelay Metha an interest for computers, etc. (Preston, 2019). Later passages concerning Neelay’s computer game company also contain metafictional comments. He is not writing a book, but his game is a work of fiction which tries to include trees and nature in general in a very complex and realistic way. When Neelay tries to add more complexity in the fictive flora of his game, his colleagues react negatively:

No more plants, boss. You can't make a game out of plants. Unless you give them bazookas.
(Powers, 2019, p.515)

And:

How...? Nguyen says. “How are the limits and shortages and permadeath going to be fun?”
(Powers, 2019, p.516)

These excerpts demonstrate the difficulty of associating entertainment and crucial topics such as climate change. It also shows the difficulty to associate action and other mainstream mechanisms to make a story or a game about trees gripping, since they live in a completely different temporality than humans.

Patricia’s relation to trees is a mix of intuition and observation. She starts with animism – “a conception that grants to living beings and things a soul equal to human beings¹⁵” (Larousse, n.d.) – in the beginning of her life. Patricia’s father is also a source of knowledge for her. She does not go to school, but follows her father, who is an ag extension agent, and who gives information to farmers on how to manage their farms in the most effective way. We see how the educational, pedagogical and vulgarizational aspects – associated to the author’s project – are a recurrent motive in the story of Patricia. On the way to the multiple farms, her father tells her the wonder of nature, and Patricia listens, fascinated. He makes up an experiment for her to understand what makes trees grow. He also offers her an abridged version of *The Metamorphosis* by Ovid, which is again another way to adapt knowledge. From a more intuitive approach to nature – she felt an animistic or intuitive idea of nature’s life and beauty – she gains

¹⁵ Conception générale qui attribue aux êtres de l'univers, aux choses, une âme analogue à l'âme humaine. (Larousse, n.d., *my translation*)

a rather empirical approach, experimenting in order to understand the world of plants. As said in *The Overstory* “acorn animism turns into its offspring, botany”, marking a passage from belief to science, but also emphasizing the link between the two, that is, botany having its origin in animism (science needing a start in an intuition of nature’s complexity and value). Later in her life, the narrator tells: “she doesn’t know yet how the system works. She knows it’s rich and beautiful” (Powers, 2019:157). She first approaches the world through intuition, later confronting it through rational experiments. She never forgets her animism beliefs: towards the end of *The Overstory*, she says that the people of Achuar, with such an animistic way of thinking, can save the world.

In her first book however, and even more so in conferences, she cannot refer to her intuitions, and has to keep to verified facts. She has difficulties in her first book to write the whole truth: “More trouble than she has the heart to tell readers of her little book. Trouble, like the atmosphere, flows everywhere, in currents beyond the power of humans to predict” (Powers, 2019, p.275). She also tries to make the picture more beautiful and uses anthropomorphic language to characterise trees: she names a type of tree “the giving trees” (Powers, 2019, p.276). She explains that “the public needs such a phrase to make the miracle a little more vivid, visible” (Powers, 2019, p.276), because humans can relate to the word “giving”, which makes them think of a generous person. She changes the title of her first book: from “How Trees Will Save the World” to “Forest Salvation”, because it creates a confusion and the reader will not know if humans will save trees or the other way round (Powers, 2019, p.277), which echoes the overall balance of *The Overstory*, where trees and humans mutually influence each other. As explained in chapter one, Patricia Westerford also indirectly introduces the concept of antropodenial. She tries to keep to facts in her books and conferences so as not to be defamed by the scientific community, but she still uses some anthropomorphic images to give trees more agency than what the scientific community allows them to have. On the one side, Patricia is trying in her book to make people less anthropocentric, make them concerned about other living beings that are the trees, and at the same time, she tries to use anthropocentrism as some kind of spectacles that can not only be used to analyse humans but also can also be used to look at trees (trees, for example, also have the capacity to communicate). This joins Anna Tsing’s statement that we have refused in the past to see the sociality of non-human beings (Tsing, 2013).

In her second book, Patricia explains her journey collecting seeds for the Seedbed bank. The seed bank was created by Patricia to identify and conserve species of trees all around the world that might soon disappear. While writing her second book, she reflects about her first book, which is in retrospect more hopeful and composed in a moment when the planet was still healthy. Her second book is indeed “a little more bleak” (Powers, 2019, p.529), in it, she admits people’s failure to see trees for what they are:

No one sees trees. We see fruit, we see nuts, we see wood, we see shade. We see ornaments or pretty fall foliage ... Dark, threatening places that must be cleared. We see branches about to crush our roof. We see a cash crop. But trees - trees are invisible. (Powers, 2019, p.529)

Her journey for the Seedbed bank through “all the continents but Antarctica” only saves “a few seeds from a few thousand trees, a fraction of the species that will vanish as the Earth’s current custodians watch, bringing countless dependents down with them” (Powers, 2019, p.530). She tries to keep some hope in her book: “She describes all the trees that are already marching north at rates that astonish those who measure them” (Powers, 2019, p.530), but the reader can feel that human beings are doomed for her. The final sentences of the book says that the seeds lie in the seed bank “until the day when watchful people can return them to the ground.” (Powers, 2019, p.531) She adds in the last minute: “If not, other experiments will go on running themselves, long after people are gone” (Powers, 2019, p.531). The idea that she loses hope in humanity can also be sensed at the moment when she commits suicide, as a way to answer the question asked to her: “what is the single best thing a person can do for tomorrow’s world?” (Powers, 2019, p.570).

In the last passage in which Patricia appears, she commits suicide in front of an assembly. If we make the parallel with the time she was called to court to testify about the importance of trees, we can see that in the two accounts, she explains the facts behind climate change and deforestation. In the first account, she is constantly restraining herself: “she fights off personal hunch and keeps to what scientific community agrees on” (Powers, 2019, p.351). In the second one, she also gives a talk with powerpoints etc., but she decides to make a public suicide. This finds a parallel in a recent short movie called “#Anita” that was shot by Le Biais Vert, where the character reacts in the same way. Anita is the image of Greta Thunberg in a near future. She realises that governments and assemblies only invite her for their image, and that her speeches are not having any effect. As a last choice she decides to commit suicide in front of an assembly.

However, the short movie does not finish with the tragedy, but adds an ironic close-up of somebody's hand, scrolling the Facebook feed, liking the publication of Anita's suicide, and right after that, liking a publication showing a cute dog. In a similar way, *The Overstory* does not end with Patricia's suicide, but the narrative just continues its way. Anita and Patricia are two characters who are invited to raise awareness about climate change, and they both underline the urgency of the problem. Still, they are not listened to, and this perhaps shows the difficulty of an effective communication about climate change, as demonstrated by Roeser.

In the end, Patricia Westerford is a person and an author torn between her intuition, her feelings for nature that come from her animistic belief; and the desire to reach as many readers as possible, or in case of a talk, to convince the audience. For that purpose, she adapts what she knows so that humans relate better to trees (the giving trees resemble a generous person), in the same way Powers concentrate all he has learned in a novel with interesting characters and a gripping narrative.

5. Conclusion

This chapter aimed to analyse how Powers had constructed an ecofiction like *The Overstory*. I also wanted to address the metafictional reflections on ecofiction within the novel and see how the author manages to show a balanced human-tree relationship in his novel. I have dealt with the notion of "maximalist novel" to describe how Powers uses most of its characteristics to make a coherent and convincing ecofiction balanced between two poles, and how these poles (characters and omniscient narrator) represent different takes on the climate crisis, and that perhaps a balance is to be found between these two poles, in what Caren Irr calls ecostocicism. Powers also puts into perspective anthropocentrism by closely interconnecting the lives of trees and humans in the novel. In the last section, the metafictional aspects of the story of Patricia Westerford have been analysed, and it has been identified that here too there is an attempt to find a balance, between an intuitive vision of nature and a scientific one, while trying to attract the broader audience with the use of anthropomorphism. These elements converge in a picture that contains many issues raised by the ecofiction. *The Overstory* is a reflection on the ecofictions (Patricia Westerford), but also a convincing story which combines polyphony (characters) and strong stands (omniscient narrator). Powers achieves a well balanced novel

that also opens up new discussions about the ecofiction novel through his metafictional reflections.

In the next chapter, *Barkskins* addresses the issue of the representation of trees in a way that is almost the opposite of *The Overstory* and *The Hidden Life of Trees*, since it does not try to make trees dearer to the readers. Rather, it attempts to show the consequences of capitalism and the capitalocene on the forests of the world and on ethnic minorities.

Chapter Three: Naturalism and the Capitalocene in *Barkskins*

Someone once wondered why it is that if a work of Man is destroyed, it is called vandalism, but if a work of nature, of God, is destroyed it is so often called progress

—Jane Goodall, *Seeds of Hope*

In the previous chapter, *The Overstory* has been characterised as a novel which seeks a balance in both how the climate crisis is addressed, and in the representations of trees and humans. Within the structure of his novel, Powers tried to connect humans with trees so that they could not be taken as separate entities. *Barkskins*, in terms of literary strategy, is entirely different; like the two other novels, it tries to decentre humans but does so in a more radical way than Wohlleben's and Powers' books. Paradoxically, even if the novel is more posthuman than the other two works of the corpus, trees are not put forward in the novel, even though deforestation is a central theme of it. However, *Barkskins* shares with *The Overstory* its length and its “totalising” aspect, in the sense that it covers in detail three hundred years of history (from the 1693 to 2013) and that the many characters move all around the globe. Whereas *The Overstory* seeks to be encyclopedic by including citations and references from various backgrounds, *Barkskins* is also an extensive novel: not for the sake of being encyclopedic but for documenting, from a historical perspective, how capitalism emerged and evolved in history. In *The Overstory*, the nine characters, even if they are deeply entangled with the lives of trees, still have quite defined personalities and take considerable space in the novel. *The Hidden Life of Trees* is solely about trees, but a human presence is quite strong through the use of anthropomorphic language. Annie Proulx however choses a detached perspective on the world of the characters, but also risks losing the readers since the characters die abruptly and rapidly after being introduced in the novel.

Barkskins is mainly set in North America (Canada and USA) and most of the characters of the novel stem from two families: the Sels and the Dukes. These families were founded by two Frenchmen, René Sel and Charles Dukes, who journeyed to New France/Canada in order to make a living there. Both families take part in the deforestation of North America: the Dukes create the lumber company “Duke and Sons”, and the Sels work as woodcutters in lumber camps. Apart from their different social status the Dukes and Sels also have distinct racial identities: René married a Mi'kmaq woman named Mari, and his children are hence half-

European, half-Mi'kmaq, but are considered by the rest of the society as Natives; the Dukes are white people. The two families work as opposite poles in the novel, and are almost stereotypically reduced to “the good ones” (the Sels, poor workers with good values) and “the bad ones” (the Dukes, careless capitalists), or, one could say, as prey and predators.

This latter Darwinian opposition is characteristic of naturalistic novels like *Barkskins*. The novel in fact is quite deterministic: since there are plenty of characters in this novel, they lack distinctive personalities and are rather flat; unlike in a traditional novel, the characters are erased from the foreground. The frame, encompassing three hundred years of history, creates a “zooming out” effect, which also puts into perspective the relative importance of the human characters. Another characteristic of the naturalistic novel is the use of repetitions to emphasise the lineage between the characters, and Annie Proulx makes abundant use of that method, especially for the Sels family members. In the Sel family, the men are all woodcutters, the fathers often abandon their families in a way or another, and most of the Sels are nostalgic for the past. Like the trees of the novel, the Sels are not entirely distinctive. This lack of individual characterisation emphasises common traits and the group. The absence of characterisation for the Native characters and the absence of description for the forests of America links the two entities together to highlight the similar fate of decimation both have to face.

This destruction and lack of characterisation of the Natives and the forest is not gratuitous. The very act of erasing the Native characters and the forests reflects how capitalism, embodied by the Duke family, considers these two entities. The historian Jason Moore explains in “The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis” (2017), how the conceptual opposition “Humanity/Nature” (on the base of an already existing Cartesian dualism) was created by capitalism. In this pair, Nature stands for non-human beings (animals and the vegetal world) but also all human minorities (women, Blacks, Native Americans, etc.). Moore explains that, since a majority of humans could be treated as non-humans, it “allowed capitals and empires to treat them cheaply – even as this cheapening was fiercely resisted” (Moore, 2017, p.7), and thus to have cheap workforce to build a capitalist society. According to this theory, the Sels, as Native Americans, are classified in the category of “Nature” along with trees and forests. Moore further explains that because their work was “cheapened”, due to their new status of natural things, it made their work “invisible, or nearly so” (Moore, 2017, p.7), which fits the idea of a common fate and the lack of characterisation of both entities identified above.

The way *Barkskins* represents Natives and forests imitates how capitalism actually treats nature and minorities, but the novel is also set in a broader frame – that of three hundred years of history – which enables the reader to zoom out on *all* the characters. Rather than just being a way of dehumanizing the characters, it enables the reader to have a broader perspective on the current climate crisis, in a less emotional way. The end of *Barkskins* also suggests more nuances than what seems like very binary in the beginning of the novel with the Duke-Sel opposition. In fact, the characters who set to reforest the country at the end of the novel all stem from the union of Kuntaw Sel and Beatrix Duke, thus mixing the two families. A speech given by Kuntaw to his community emphasises hybridity and solutions rather than a hopeless wish to go back to olden days. The project of reforestation itself, even if happening in a time without much hope, shows that the Sels were finally able to adapt in their disappearing world and lead a project that aims at the future.

This analysis is structured as follows. First, the characteristics of the naturalistic novel and its effect on the characters in the novel will be analysed. Second, the Natives and their representation in the book will be examined, paying particular attention on the repetitive patterns in their lives. Third, the descriptions of forests in *Barkskins* and the evolution of mentalities around them will be studied. Finally, the link between the forests and the Natives will be restated, and it will be demonstrated how Annie Proulx comes from a binary story to a more complex one, which emphasises hybridity, and the power to change within a damaged world.

1. *The Naturalistic Novel*

As a consequence of the time span covered in the novel (from 1693 to 2013), many characters populate *Barkskins*. Even if the novel is lengthy in terms of pages (713 pages), most of the characters have a small allotted part of the book, which implies that their lives seem very short. In the most extreme cases, characters can appear for the first time in the novel and die within the same sentence (De Bruyn, 2016, p.88). Subsequently, it is also difficult to develop distinct personalities in the characters within the same family (the two families are of course quite distinct), since related members of one family experiences similar events and issues. These flat characters are perhaps a consequence of the naturalistic frame of the novel. As argued in “The New Naturalism: Cormac McCarthy, Frank Norris, and the Question of Postmodernism” the

deterministic aspect of naturalism, and thus the lack of the free will of the characters, has for consequence that the characters “are often flat, stereotypical, or passive” (Clarke, 2014, p.54). Although both families have flat characters, I would like to already note here that the Sels are more prone to resemblance than the Dukes among themselves, as will be analysed later.

In addition to being flat, the characters are often “discarded” in the course of the novel; violent and/or unforeseen deaths¹⁶ happen in the course of the narrative. The deaths are either atrocious, or totally fortuitous; they catch both the reader and the characters unprepared. By their untimely deaths, it can be argued that the characters are disposed of, as if the writer, or a superior force, suddenly decided that one character was not useful to the machinery of history anymore. The narrator, a third-person distant instance as often in naturalistic novels (Clarke, 2014, p.56) is not really involved, and is quite different from the very intrusive narrator in *The Overstory*. Here, it is rather descriptive and neutral towards what the characters experience. This “destruction” of the characters mirrors other destructions (the deforestation of North America, the destructive force of the Duke or capitalism in general, and the destruction of Native Americans through diseases and discrimination) and makes destruction a major theme in *Barkskins*.

This violent aspect of the novel is also naturalism’s heritage, which often depicts a “hostile nature” (Bilton, 2002, p.177), and tries to prove that humans’ nature is inherently violent. In this assumption that humans are intrinsically brutal, naturalism follows Darwin’s theory that man is an animal (Bilton, 2002, p.172). The distinction “human-animal” no longer exists in naturalistic writing (Clarke, 2014, p.55). This is mirrored in *Barkskins* by the use of comparisons, such as “breed[ing] like mice” (Proulx, 2017, p.213) “like spring geese heading north” (Proulx, 2017, p.469) which are analysed in *Learning to Be a Species in the Anthropocene*, and while these can in fact be pejorative and support the naturalistic vision, De Bruyn considers that these “level rather than erect hierarchies [...] and are applied to the powerful rather than the powerless” (De Bruyn, 2016, p.85). Although the naturalistic opposition of the Dukes and Sels as predators and victims suggests an extremely essentialist idea of inequalities, it may be argued that Proulx compensates this with other mechanisms such as these comparisons and leads the reader’s sympathy more towards the Sels than the Dukes.

¹⁶ Unforeseen and sudden deaths often occur in *The Overstory* as well, but as a way to bring us back to our condition of mortal human beings, and to compare humans’ life span to that of trees, which can live for centuries. These also occur in *The Hidden Life of Trees*, in a way to emphasise the struggle for life that trees experience.

Nevertheless, the tone of the novel is rather bleak but also sarcastic, as if these lives were, in the end, not much in the face of the relentless march of history, or of the capitalist system. As said in the introduction, the novel “zooms out” to give the reader a broader and perhaps less emotional perspective, which could be linked with Caren Irr’s argument on Ecoistocism, explained in chapter two. In the case of *Barkskins*, it could be said that the “zooming out effect” can work in an ecostocist way for the reader, who can grasp the complexity of the problem after reading the novel.

Characters are thus not the main focus of this novel. In fact, another characteristic of the naturalistic novel is the “reversal of foreground and background” (Bilton, 2002, p.172), where the characters, usually in the foreground, move to the background. Since literary naturalism considers that “the environment determines the individual” (Bilton, 2002, p.172), the environment moves to the foreground. In a similar way, *Barkskins* shifts the focus from the characters (by making them flat, and discarding them) to what they have in common: for the Sels, that means not dwelling on the specificities of each character, but rather show what is similar in their lives, such as the injustice that all Sels members have to face due to their racial identity. However, individuals do matter to a certain extent, as will be seen in a later part of the analysis. For now, my analysis focuses on how the characters are described at the time of their death and how the novel emphasizes the similarities between characters of a same family. René’s life is commented upon at the time of his death:

Ends come to everyone, even woodcutters. All his life René was a défricheur, un bûcheron or, as the ancient book put it, “a woodsman, a forester, a forest owner; an ax owner, a feller of trees, a woodcutter, a user of the ax. He cuts with an ax; he fells trees — cuts them, tops them, strips them, splits them, stacks them.” His life was spent in severe toil, stinging sweat running in his eyes, bitten by insects of the hot woods, the callused hands shaping into a permanent curl to fit ax handles, the bruises and blood, the constant smoke of burning trees, the pain of unremitting labor, the awkward saw, treacherous saplings used as pry bars, fitting new handles on broken spades and the everlasting lifting of great vicious tree trunks.

But Achille, his eleven-year-old son, found him dead on his knees in the forest, his knotted hands clenched on the ax handle, the bit sunk into a cedar, René dead at forty from a chop to his neck. A sharp scalping knife had been set above and parallel with his eyebrows and drawn around the circumference of his head, the scalp peeled off and carried away to be redeemed for

the bounty. He was, until the end, a skillful woodsman, his life and body shaped to the pleasure of the ax. And so his sons and grandsons after him. (Proulx, 2017, p.58)

The narrator chiefly identifies René as a woodcutter (and not as a father, a husband, or a human being for example), using repetitions and enumerations to emphasize the importance or predominance of his work in his life, and perhaps also to give a hammering sensation that is coupled to the harsh aspect of the work. The narrator also establishes a link between René's vocation and his descendants: "and so his sons and grandsons after him". The reader is notified that a pattern will be followed with the other characters and will be able to verify that most Sel men will become woodcutters in camps. In fact, *Barkskins* shows little improvement of the living conditions of the Natives. It can also be noted that, even if at first René is reluctant to clearing the forest around the land, in the end, "his life and body [were] shaped to the pleasure of the ax". This sense of satisfaction for the hard work is also found throughout the book: almost all the Sel men will be employed in lumber camps, and even though the conditions are harsh, they enjoy their job.

René is not only murdered; his death is described in minute detail. This is typical of Proulx's writing: she adds to her realism a taste for gore (Bilton, 2002, p.177). The mention of his son finding him dead is also the beginning of a movement linking all the fathers and sons of the Sel family: the trauma of losing one's parent is consistent throughout *Barkskins*, on the Sel side, and forms another repeated motive. Many times, as we will see, the fathers in the Sel lineage will leave their sons, for different reasons. If this happened in one of the characters' life, it would be considered as anecdotal. But since this is almost systematically repeated, it is considerably more meaningful, it adds a weight to the story. The past faults are repeated, the characters do not manage to withdraw themselves from their fate.

Similarly, the mistreatment of the Sel women is also regularly repeated. They are mostly used for the pleasure of men or killed. Their presence as individuals is even more erased than that of the Sel men. For instance, Mari is used as a concubine by Trépagny (the man who employs René and Charles Duquet when they arrive in Wobik), and then forced to marry René. Their daughter Noé is raped and bears the child of her rapist. Achille (son of René and Mari, brother of Zoé) sees his wife dead and dismembered when he comes back from a hunt. Malaan, wife of Kuntaw (grandson of René, son of Achille), finds refuge in the Post and also serves as a concubine because Kuntaw abandoned her when he left to find his father. Tonny, the son of Kuntaw and Malaan, marries Hannah, but she is soon used as a concubine by white men at the

same post, and she is killed by one of these men. Elise (daughter of Tonny and Hannah) is married to a poor and alcoholic Indian who abuses her.

In literary naturalism, repetitions are a common method to show lineage between the characters (Cabanès, 1993, p.99). In *Barkskins* these repetitions occur, for instance, in physiological descriptions of the characters. For example, Achille has the same smile as his mother Mari (Proulx, 2017, p.161). More importantly, as has been shown in the previous paragraphs, the repetitions occur in the events of the life of one family (e.g. Sel fathers abandoning their families, Sel women abused and/or killed, Sel men working as woodcutters). Because of these repetitions, Cabanès argues that the characters “are never entirely one. They are a link in a physiological chain, the elements of a community. The existence of the protagonists in a novel is always dependant on a ‘before’ that often foreshadows an ‘again’¹⁷” (Cabanès, 1993, p.98). Commenting on the novel *I Malavoglia* by Verga, Cabanès explains that the repeated desire of the characters to free themselves from their condition shows the entrapment of the characters (Cabanès, 1993, p.101). This repeated desire creates a “horizon of expectation¹⁸” (Cabanès, 1993, p.101) which allows the reader to confirm if that horizon is met at some point of the novel. In *Barkskins*, after having repeatedly observed that fathers abandon their families, the reader is able to notice that one generation does not really learn from another. Cabanès also underlines the dehumanizing effect of these repetitions : “the constant return of similar elements becomes a sign of alienation: it is a way to dismantle characters and to make them as anonymous as in a crowd, to make them part of a collective voice¹⁹” (Cabanès, 1993, p.103). These repetitions concern more the Sels than the Dukes, since the naturalistic novel tends to focus on the marginalized and the poor. Even if the Duke characters resemble their ancestor, the repetitions concern the Sel characters more importantly. The aim is to show how the Sel characters are entrapped in a society where Native Americans are discriminated, how the capitalistic system represented by the Duke family is imposed on the Native Americans and how it is difficult to escape these inequalities. The Duke men rule the society and are powerful enough to take decisions and shape their lives. Therefore, they are not entrapped in the circle of repetitions. The Duke are in the “Humanity” part of the Nature/Humanity distinction created

¹⁷ “Il apparaît ainsi que les personnages ne sont jamais entièrement clos sur eux-mêmes. Ils sont les maillons d'une chaîne physiologique, les éléments d'une collectivité. L'existence des héros de roman est en effet toujours tributaire d'un « avant » qui préfigure bien souvent un « encore » ”. (Cabanès, 1993, p.98, *my translation*)

¹⁸ Horizon d'attente (Cabanès, 1993, p.101, *my translation*)

¹⁹ “l'éternel retour du semblable devient signe d'une aliénation, manière de déconstruire le personnage, de le faire disparaître dans l'anonymat d'une foule, d'une voix collective ”. (Cabanès, 1993, p.103, *my translation*)

by capitalism, as explained by Jason Moore. The Dukes enrich themselves with the cheap labour of the Natives, who are not considered as humans.

To finish this section explaining the determinism in the characters' lives and their relative unimportance as individuals, it should also be mentioned that even during their lives, characters feel that they have to face forces stronger than their will, such as Noë who regrets having moved, and did not expect her life to take such a turn:

She had not thought to live far from René and Mari's house, and now they were near the ocean. She had not thought to be pregnant and now she had a kid. "All this happened because of Theotiste and Elphège had brought them to Mi'kma'ki, the land of memory". (Proulx, 2017, p.156)

Having said that, Noë regrets having moved and is conscious of what happened to her. Even if this is a strongly deterministic novel, characters do reflect about their condition. As argued by Bilton, Annie Proulx is not strictly a naturalistic author in the sense that her characters "are anything but specimens in a laboratory, and her stories lack any kind of didactic purpose, or any heavy-handed warning of social degeneration or social atavism" (Bilton, 2002, p.178). In fact, Bilton demonstrates that the main characters in two of Proulx's novels, *The Shipping News* and *Postcards*, progressively turn into better persons. In *Barkskins*, the reader can barely see characters evolve, considering the short span of their life, and even through generations it can hardly be said that their condition improves, or that they do not repeat past mistakes. But the novel and the Duke/Sel opposition is complexified towards the end of the book, which can be seen, for instance, through the union of Kuntaw Sel and Beatrix Duke. Lavinia Duke is another example: as she has to struggle as a woman to find a place in the company of her father, she has the sympathy of the reader (De Bruyn, 2016, p.79) even though she has the same capitalist ideas as her ancestors.

In this first part, the naturalistic aspects of *Barkskins* have been exposed: determinism, violence, a grim tone, flat characters, many repetitions which show lineage. Annie Proulx's insistence on repetitions is not entirely gratuitous. Naturalism can be considered as showing "a lack of humane sympathy, of a nihilistic stress on ugliness for its own sake" (Bilton, 2002, p.178), but Proulx's naturalism "lacks the lofty scientific distance" (Bilton, 2002, p.178) of classic novels of the genre. Her insistence on repetitions, more than emphasizing determinism, allows the

reader to witness the grip of capitalism on the lives of the marginalized and the poor. The realism of the novel can be debated; Proulx's tendency to gore scenes exaggerates realism at times and repetitions in the lives of the Sel are quite emphasized. Nevertheless, Proulx's novel is realistic and depicts Natives and North American forests in the same "flat" way in order to reflect what are forests and Natives in capitalism's eyes. One of the characters invited to Lavinia's business dinner talks about "the will of the people" and the narrator notes: "he meant the will of white people, for another of his banners was that 'the Constitution was made by whites *for* whites.' After all, who else was there?" (Proulx, 2017, p.531). This last comment summarizes the stance of the white capitalists in the novel. Forests are treated likewise: Charlie, son of Lavinia and Duke Breitsprecher, has taken an opposite path to that of his parents, and left to South America to study tropical forests. He writes in a notebook:

Nothing in the natural world, no forest, no river, nor insect nor leaf has any intrinsic value to men. All is worthless, utterly dispensable unless we discover some benefit to ourselves in it – even the most ardent forest lover thinks this way. Men behave as overlords. They decide what will flourish and what will die. I believe that humankind is evolving into a terrible new species and I am sorry I am one of them (Proulx, 2017, p.658).

2. Imagination and the Natives

Since they are discriminated and would rather live in the past, the Sels have to live in their imagination. The first Native character the reader meets is Mari, a woman who is the servant of Trépagny and will become René's wife. She lives away from her original place, and from the beginning of the novel, Natives are thus entrapped in the colonial system. Mari remains deeply influenced by her childhood memories and lives according to her upbringing and traditions. She neglects for instance the garden which Trépagny has assigned her to tend, since she has been taught to set eels traps, or gather wild medicinal plants, but not to garden. She passes on the oral tradition of her people to her children; she describes her original place as an ideal location. However, the place where Mari lived with other Mi'kmaq people before is not ideal (a harsh place in the winter) and the children of Mari therefore have a false idea of that place in their minds. After the death of their parents and the theft of their property by Renardette, the children of Mari and René try to settle in the community where their mother used to live, only to find that the place is far from a heaven. Elphège wonders "if it had been a mistake to fill their heads with stories of a summer world" (Proulx, 2017, p.169). Achille,

remembering the tales of Indians chasing whales, tries to capture one himself, but fails. From the start, the Sel brothers and sisters try to go back to their origins but fail to do so. They compare the stories they have been told – imaginary stories, or stories that belong to the past – to the reality and their present and are, therefore, systematically disappointed. The idea that, confronted to the disappearance of their world, Natives have to keep their values and their original lifestyle is often repeated in *Barkskins*. Sosep, an old Mi'kmaq man which the children of René meet in Odanak after their theft of property, gives a speech to his community. The speech is representative of the internal debates in their community:

[...] “All these woods once ours,” he said, “and we went anywhere we wished without hindrance. That time has passed. but I wish to tell you that if we Mi'kmaw people are to survive we must constantly hold to the thoughts of Mi'kmaw ways in our minds. We will live in two worlds. We must keep our Mi'kmaw world - where we, the plants, animals and birds are all persons together who help each other together - fresh in our thoughts and lives.

[...]

Noë muttered to Zoë, “Does he mean we must give up metal pots and go back to boiling food with hot rocks in a hollow wood pot as Loze said they did in the old days?”

Sosep had not heard this and continued. “If we had not harmed so many animal beings they would fight with us against the outsiders. Especially the beaver.

[...]

Achille told himself he would live the Mi'kmaw way , imagining all was well. He would take a wife and he would tell his children that they, too, must imagine that they lived in a Mi'kmaw world though it was ceasing to exist. They must remember how that life had been, not how it had become. (Proulx, 2017, p.181)

A first thing to note is the discourse around the change of their society. Old Sosep acknowledges that the time when Indians lived in harmony with nature has passed; even if they wanted to come back to olden days, they would not be able to. Amongst other reasons, white men easily outnumber them. They know that their power of influence on the world is low and therefore seek refuge in their imagination. Natives resist change, but the world cannot help but change: for instance, the tale of a Mi'kmaq man drinking in a saucer and being killed for not respecting traditional ways, serves to show how “everything [...] change[s]” (Proulx, 2017, p.172) because soon after the murder, other Mi'kmaq will possess saucers and nobody is killed for that. In the same way, Noë wonders if they will have to give up the comfort of metal pots, something they grew up with, and which is, even if not part of original traditions, a part of their lives. The fact

of “living in two worlds” might indicate a link with W.E.B. Du Bois and the concept of “double consciousness”, i.e. the difficulty to accommodate two identities: the “original Native” identity, and the one acquired after colonisation, where metal pots, for example, are part of their lives. They not only wish to go back to days when the community was not threatened, but they also wish to keep what has improved their lives. The Sel brothers and sisters come from this hybrid background of a Mi’kmaq mother and a French father and are thus initially concerned by this “double consciousness”.

Another important element is animism: because the Indians massively hunted the beavers to trade with the Europeans, they think it is partly the cause of their downfall. Loze, a woman the Sel brother and sisters meet in Odanak, says something similar: “Because our fathers killed so many beavers to trade with the Europeans the beaver are angry and have left the country, and now strike us with illnesses” (Proulx, 2017, p.174). Their community do not think of beavers as an almost extinct species, but they find reasons in their attitude towards animals to explain the disappearance of beavers. As a consequence, the culture of the Natives disappears at the same time the beavers go extinct: “Yes, the beaver had become some kind of whiteman money and the custom of placing a beaver skin on a grave had fallen away” (Proulx, 2017, p.171). Because the beavers disappear, the customs of the Indians can no longer remain the same. Ursula Heise demonstrates in *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings Of Endangered Species* how “extinction narratives” connect the disappearance of a species with the loss of a part of the society’s identity and culture:

In literary, visual, and musical representations of extinction, biological crisis typically becomes a proxy for cultural concerns: worries about the future of nature, on one hand, and on the other hand, hopes that a part of one’s national identity and culture might be preserved, revived, or changed for the better if an endangered species could be allowed to survive or an extinct one could be rediscovered. (Heise, 2016, p.49).

Moreover, the word “imagine” is also key to understand the Sel. Achille has to imagine he lives in the same conditions as his ancestors, with resources aplenty around him. However, since it is not the case, Mi’kmaq are denying the situation they are in and this only brings more despair. In fact, it takes “hours, even days to find many once-common things” (Proulx, 2017, p.180) to the point that Achille “somehow lo[s]es the respect of the animal persons”.

This attraction to the past is a most recurrent pattern. The fathers leave their wives and children in a repeated way, such as Achille who is the first one to leave, to find a better life. Then Kuntaw, Achille's son, leaves in the hope to find his father, leaving in his turn, his son Tonny. Tonny is alone with his mother who has no resources and is taken by a white man at the English trading post as a concubine. Tonny has to live in the streets around the post. He finally finds Kuntaw and takes his children to leave them with their grandfather, in the hope that they will have a better life with their grandfather. Towards the first half of the 19th century, Jinot, abandoned to his grandfather Kuntaw by his father Tonny, leaves his only son Aaron when he goes to New-Zealand, and dies there without seeing Aaron again. He also fails to climb up the social ladder, because after the murder of his manager, he cannot go back to his work in an axe manufactory and has to resume wood cutting for a living.

Native characters hold on to the past – the sons to their fathers – because it seems the only good thing, even if they have not witnessed it. Amboise expresses the same idea: “Everything yesterday! Everything good happens long ago!” (Proulx, 2017, p.283). By contrast, the Dukes form a family which goes forward, always wanting to accelerate progress. However, by always wanting to go forward, they neglect the forest – while the repetitive looking back to the past of the Sels enables them to imagine a place where the forest is respected and thus, nostalgia of the past is not entirely negative, while the Dukes are entirely destructive. Old Sosep's speech, as well as Kuntaw's speech, as will be seen later, try to rethink, reorganize their community while there is no such movement in the Duke. The collective meetings of the Mi'kmaq community, which help rethinking the lives of their community, are opposed to the board meetings of the Duke family, the business talks, and deforestation. At the end of the novel, and without much improvement to their condition, Sels are still imagining a better life: “Once again Sels took up axes, and although everything was difficult they continued to talk together, to look for ways out of their troubles” (Proulx, 2017, p.610).

3. *Evolution of Forests' Perception*

In her paper “Terror, Error or Refuge: Forests in Western Literature”, Catherine Addison identifies three major ways in which literary works have imagined forests: the forest as the opposite of the city – which stands for civilisation; forests as a place of “wandering”; or forests as a refuge (Addison, 2007, p.119). In *Barkskins*, forest as a place of darkness and savagery is predominant for the major part of the novel. *Barkskins*, by focusing on early capitalism, and its Nature/Humanity distinction, reflects on how capitalism sees the forest as out of civilisation, as a place of economic interests; but also portrays the imaginary of the forest before the Romantic artistic movement of the end of the 18th century, where the forests “were the cluttered and darkened spaces that had to be cleared in order to let in enlightenment and build the courtly city” (Addison, 2007, p.116). *Barkskins* is thus at the opposite of the rhetoric of wonder in the two other books of this thesis: forest as a magical place in Wollheben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees* and trees triggering mystical visions in *The Overstory*. However, we have two conceptions of the forest from the beginning: the European/American one, as well as the Native one.

The beginning of *Barkskins* clearly states the project of the colonists: clearing the land or what they call a “grand défrichement” (Proulx, 2017, p.9). Some characters are opposed to that project, they do not want to cut more trees than necessary, but the majority take it for granted that the forests are wild things made to be exterminated. Seigneur Trépagny for example says: “we are here to clear the forest, to subdue this evil wilderness” (Proulx, 2017, p.17), and most characters repeat this idea. René is the one to wonder: “Why do we cut the forest while there are so many fine clearings?” (Proulx, 2017, p.17), and the two Trépagny brothers also disapprove, but their voice is not heard. René is answered: “Of course it is best to choose a wooded site and clear it – the more the trees we cut down the sooner we’ll have fine farms and more settlers.” (Proulx, 2017, p.33). René feels some injustice: “In France, thought René, the forests were controlled by laws beyond the desires of the seigneur. That Trépagny had the right to order the clearing confounded him and he sensed injustice” (Proulx, 2017, p.29). That injustice, however, will slowly decrease, and every Sel character will get used to cutting down trees for a living. What is more, cutting trees seems one of the only possible jobs available to Natives. The descendants of René, partly Mi’kmaq, will find it easier to identify themselves as tree choppers, than to identify as Native Americans (which was alluded to in the description of René’s death). Since they lack an identity, it is easily replaced by their “function” in the new society. Achille wishes that he was chopping trees with his father again (Proulx, 2017, p.198);

for Jinot, “taking down trees was his anodyne” (Proulx, 2017, p.308); Josime identifies himself as “tree chopper” (Proulx, 2017, p.314). It is only by the admission of other immigrants from Europe in the country that the feeling of injustice revives in *Barkskins*. The two Breitsprecher cousins are in fact appalled that Americans have no sense of forest management. Armenius (surveyor for the Dukes) tries to explain to his cousin Dieter (who came from Germany to see the great American forests) how North Americans consider forests: “Hopeless, hopeless to try to describe the situation in North America, where people spurned the craft of forestry” (Proulx, 2017, p.475). Armenius later explains that they see no logical connection between the pure air in the forest and the poor quality of air in the city, Americans thinking that this is related to God’s will (Proulx, 2017, p.480).

There is an opposition between, firstly, the fact that the characters think that the forests are infinite, even towards the end of the novel: “So extensive are the forests here that Americans cannot see an end to them. Therefore, they have no interest in preserving them.” (Proulx, 2017, p.480). And secondly, there is a vague conscience that forests are receding, every time the Dukes have to find another spot for their exploitation. Ecological considerations are present in *Barkskins*: erosion, pollution in the cities, extinction of species, but these seem to be there as details that the characters do not always notice. The Sels realise the loss of the beavers, for example, because it is directly linked to their culture. The Dukes, however, make money on the destruction of nature. And so, one another reason why climate change is a difficult topic to address in a novel, is that “climate effects are all around us all the time” (Callaway, 2018, p.1). In *Barkskins*, events like the Dust Bowl episode occur, but no character is able to link it with deforestation. As in *The Bone Clock* (2014), which Callaway analyses, the environmental crisis becomes a major theme at the end of the novel. In these two novels, problems created by climate change have turned alarming. These novels, as Callaway explains, warn the reader all along the novel to pay attention to small changes, to details, to what has become the ordinary, or else climate issues will become unmanageable.

The only real considerations about forests start with Dieter and Armenius Breitsprecher’s conversations about deforestation and its consequences: “Surely they have some sense of soil erosion, so painfully obvious when it appears?” (Proulx, 2017, p.480), inquires Dieter. They discuss forest management and its economic advantages. Still, at the same period of time, other characters do not understand forest management: “God’s sake, how on earth does he manage a forest ?” says at the Duke board meeting Edward. Cut ‘em down! That’s forest managing”

(Proulx, 2017, p.476). Then comes Charles, son of Lavinia and Dieter, who has a more radical view on forests: he refuses any exploitation of trees, and moves to South America to study tropical forests, their biodiversity. He refuses the idea of replanting and is in favour of preserving old growth forests: “I am sure that wild natural woodlands are the only true forests [...] A forest living for itself rather than the benefit of humankind.” (Proulx, 2017, p.643).

To finish with, Sapatasia’s group (composed of tree Sels family members and other secondary characters, working to reforestation at the end of the 20th century) finds an in-between: since the old-growth forests are disappearing, they have to reforest the country, even if the forests they will plant will not resemble the original ones. This echoes the Natives’ situation, who have to move on and live in the world that has changed; as explained by Ursula Heise, stories of extinction often consider that, when a species becomes extinct, people also consider that this is the end of their culture or nation. However, Heise suggests a more positive thinking, where new species could also bring a new identity to a nation or a group. In *Barkskins* this is materialized with Sapatasia’s group replanting trees and hoping to build a future for other generations.

4. *Natives, the Forest and Hybridity*

The link between trees and Natives is clearly established in the novel: “The Forest was a grand resource and it was both the enemy and wealth. Achille felt it was the same with the Mi’kmaq: the white settlers used them and took them down.” (Proulx, 2017, p.196). In fact, as life becomes more and more cruel for the Sel members, the forests of America recede equally. However, the relationship between nature and the Natives does not start with colonialism and their joined decimation. They are in fact linked by the animistic belief that all things of nature are connected, and that every element of that network has equal importance and deserves equal respect. But it is true to say that nature and the Natives also have a shared fate as soon as colonialism starts in North America. Similar to how ecofeminism considers that nature and women have a special bond, because both had and have to face similar patterns of domination (nature is dominated by human beings, and women by men), the same can be said for Natives and nature. Both are colonised, suppressed, denied their identity and complexity.

However, the last part of the novel, part ten, almost takes a U-turn, breaks the logical continuation of the relentless march of history/capitalism. Natives become actors of their lives;

they are not repeatedly characterized by the same traits as their ancestors. And whereas the forests are cut down from the beginning of the book, some characters start to replant it. Part one to part nine are mostly about destructive motives, while part ten, although still grim, is about reconstruction. A more hopeful for the Sels future was already predictable by this speech given by old Kuntaw to Aaron:

"I know how it is", he said. "I felt this. Look you." He took an empty wooden bowl, put in a dipper of water, asked Mauri to bring a dipper of mackerel oil from the pot and added it. He stirred the water and oil briskly with a forked twig until it whirled into an amalgam of froth. "Water is whiteman. Oil is Mi'kmaw. In the bowl is mix-up, métis," he said, "whiteman and Mi'kmak. Now watch." They all stared at the bowl. The glistening mackerel oil rose and floated on top of the water. "That's how it was with me, long ago. I tried to be whiteman, but Mi'kmaw oil in me come to top. That same oil come up in you. Sometime I hope for this Canada that the Mi'kmaw oil will blend with the water and oil come to the top. We will hold our country again someday"" he said , "but we will be a little bit changed - a little bit watery and the whiteman a bit oily." (Proulx, 2017, p.601)

Old Kuntaw once more in *Barkskins* expresses what all male Indians of the family wishes: to come back to their true origins, their original land, which means to not live like a white man, but like a Mi'kmaq. Kuntaw explains that two forces fight in him: the white men's ways and the Mi'kmaq's ways, but that the latter are stronger in him. This speech also echoes Sosep's speech discussed earlier, although Kuntaw's answer to Aaron seems more reasonable: instead of imagining that they still live in the original Mi'kmaq world, Indians must accept being transformed a little. The oil and the water are also metaphors for the two families, the Sel and the Duke. The two families will mix together, as they do at some point, when Kuntaw has a relationship with Beatrix, Outger's daughter; three children are born from that union. Kuntaw perhaps illustrates in his speech how he became westernized by Beatrix, and how Beatrix tried to find her Indian origins in Kuntaw. Coincidence or not, the main Sel characters of the end of the novel, the activists who try to reverse deforestation – Sapatasia, Félix and Jeanne – all stem from this union.

A change in the structure of *Barkskins* discloses the coming change in the course of the story. All the other parts of the novel either feature the Sel family members or the Duke family members, alternately. The tenth part, however, features both families; it has eight chapters, the first five chapters devoted to the Duke family, and the three last ones to the Sel. The transition

is not announced, the fifth chapter of part ten finishes with the sale of the Breitsprecher-Duke company, and the last line mentioning that Breitsprecher Seedlings still works as a separate entity (Proulx, 2017, p.678). This separate project originating in the Duke family is continued by Sapatasia's project, who is joined by Jeanne and Félix. The two families being reunited in the last part recalls Kuntaw's metaphor of oil and water mixing together. Moreover, the Duke's story ends on a failure, the end of their family business. There also seems to be a dead end in the Duke descendency, while an opposite trend can be observed in the Sel family. Félix says anecdotally: "if every Sel relative would give us a dollar, we'd be rich." This shows how numerous the Sels are. In a way, the Sels have absorbed the Duke family: Sapatasia, Jeanne and Felix all come from the union of Kuntaw and Beatrix, the latter having Duke blood in her veins. The Sels, who have been dominated for the whole duration of the novel have now the upper hand. They do not resemble their ancestors, they have been westernized, but they have survived, and they are trying to protect the nature. Since the destinies of the forest and the Natives are related in the book, it could be said that, if the Sels start to have a more positive tendency, the same could be said of the forest. Not in their original form, obviously – like the traditional way of living of the Native Americans cannot come back, the old growth forests will not come back in their original form but might come back in another.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, there was no literary mechanism as such which enable the reader to feel closer to trees after reading the analysed novel. Barkskins has no didactical aim, i.e. the desire of teaching something about trees' particular ways of being in the world like in *The Hidden Life of Trees* or indirectly in *The Overstory*. It does however try to instruct the reader on the Capitalocene with a historical perspective and this is why there is no particular focus on the trees themselves but on deforestation as a consequence of capitalism. The novel draws a parallel between forests and Native Americans and highlights how their fate is linked, and to a certain extent there is also a disdain for all the characters and the novel elevates itself above the human world. Opposite to how Richard Powers and Peter Wohlleben try to reenchanted our understanding of nature, Annie Proulx tries to apply in her novel the mechanisms of capitalism. From a historical perspective, Proulx recounts the beginnings of capitalism and shows how our society came this far. However, the reader never loses a certain sympathy for the Sel family and Proulx shows some hope towards the end of the novel, even if the general tendency is still grim. From the high-shot angle perspective, Proulx gets rid of the characters altogether to make a more posthuman novel, although not putting other species forward either.

Chapter Four: Scale and Posthumanism, a Comparative Study of the Corpus

Everything comes to nothing, everything perishes,
everything passes, only the world remains, only
time endures.

— Denis Diderot

The previous chapters have each dealt with a specific work of the chosen corpus. Each chapter provided an opportunity to analyse certain aspects of the ecofiction genre and the current debates within the field of ecocriticism, with a focus on trees and how they are figured in ecofictions, but also how these beings can come closer to humans in the collective imaginary.

In chapter 1, the study of *The Hidden Life of Trees* allowed us to analyse the limits of humans' understanding of trees and how it is possible to address the life of trees without altering their essence, and at the same time attract a wide audience to change people's perception of nature. Anthropomorphism has been defined as a natural mechanism used to understand one's world, criticised by the scientific community because it highlights resemblances with humanity but erases the plant's specificity. However, used in *The Hidden Life of Trees* as a vulgarisation method allowed many readers to have a better understanding of trees. Such a book can be more impactful on the short term than scientific research which might take a decade to reach the public.

In chapter 2, *The Overstory* has been characterised as a maximalist novel, balanced by its internal dialectic (chaos-function and cosmos-function). It has been demonstrated that there is a balance between how trees and humans are represented, i.e. the anthropocentric aspect of the novel is nuanced because it shows how humans are interconnected with trees. *The Overstory* also reflects on the climate crisis and the ways to address it, which is mirrored in the opposition between the omniscient narrator and the human characters. The metafictional aspects of the book have also been addressed through the character of Patricia Westerford, writer and scientist who attempts in her books to make trees interesting for her readers, without vulgarising too much; and on the other hand, when confronted to the scientific community, she tries not to let her animistic feelings show.

In chapter 3, *Barkskins* has been described as a naturalist novel taking a three-hundred-year frame in order to map the beginnings and the functioning of the Capitalocene. The novel shows

through the use of two families how capitalism created the society-nature divide which classified animals, plants and other humans (Natives, women, Black people, etc.), as part of nature, and as a consequence enabled white people to exploit them or use them as cheap labour. The lack of characterisation of the Native characters as well as the indistinctiveness of trees of the forest in the novel reflects this disinterest of capitalism in these beings. However, the timespan of the novel erases all characters' specificities all together.

The similarities between these books have been addressed briefly in each chapter, but this comparative chapter aims to address the similarities and differences of the works of the corpus together. First, this chapter attempts to identify general trends in these three books about the literary mechanisms used by the authors of this corpus. Then, the chapter focuses on two important themes or concepts in ecocriticism – scale and posthumanism – and compares how the chosen corpus deals with these two themes. One of the key similarities or differences in these three books is scale: in fact, *The Overstory* and *Barkskins* are two long novels, which take a broad perspective on the world, the first one with its nine very different characters, and all the topics it addresses, the other with its three-hundred-year perspective and numerous characters as well. On the other hand, *The Hidden Life of Trees* is very personal and is based on observations of a local area. These matters of scale echo debates around planetary views in ecocriticism, as will be developed later. Questions of scales are also related to posthumanist views, since choosing a broader perspective means taking a step back from full-blown anthropocentrism. Posthumanism is also a crucial aspect overall in the selected corpus. It can be seen that the human perspective is challenged in every book of the corpus, but in very different ways; the interspecies aspect of the plot (inclusion of trees in the plot, if not as characters, as a major presence) has to do with a rejection of anthropocentrism in these ecofictions. However, anthropocentrism is challenging to leave altogether behind, because there is a certain impossibility to comprehend trees' experience as a whole, as seen in chapter one. The use of the concept of posthumanism as a point of comparison enables us to draw conclusions on how the three books make space for trees in this human world.

1. *General Trends on Literary Mechanisms Used in the Corpus*

First, two general rhetorics or two different approaches can be identified. On the one hand, Powers and Wohlleben write about nature with the aim of re-enchanting it for the reader. In Wohlleben's non-fiction it is science and observation that serve this rhetoric, in Powers' novel it is mystical revelations that reveal the beauty of nature. On the other hand, in Annie Proulx's

Barkskins, the aim is not to re-enchant nature, but to show the causes of deforestation and how capitalism destroys nature and decimates ethnic minorities. In other words, there is on the one hand an agenda that actively aims to change our perception of nature, and on the other hand one that aims to educate us on one aspect of the climate crisis but does not put nature as a character forward.

Second, a number of literary techniques to bring trees and humans closer in the books have been identified. In the first chapter, there was mostly a use of anthropomorphic language, as well as the semantic field of cooperation and natural selection. *The Overstory* also uses anthropomorphic language, but also "vegetalises" humans by comparing them to plants and trees. Moreover, *The Overstory* shows how everything is related to trees and links the lives of the tree and human characters together so much that their stories are no longer separable. In *Barkskins* likewise, there is a convergence between man and human, but it is a convergence through suffering and destruction, a convergence of destiny.

The three books also deal differently with matters of planetary time and space, and are posthumanists to different degrees, as will be seen in the following sections.

2. *Scale, planetary space and time*

Scale, whether it is related to time or space, is a much-debated topic in ecocriticism. As far as space is concerned, scholars of the field often discuss the possibility of including in literature the scale at which the consequences of the climate crisis take place. Phenomena such as rising temperatures, even if they are caused mainly by developed countries, affect the planet as a whole. First-wave ecocriticism focused on the regional and the local, and conceived local communities as "natural, supposedly conserved from the contaminations of international capitalism" (Clark, 2019, p.39). However, Clark writes, thinking of local communities as "natural" is equal to ignoring the fact that "local ecosystems change and affect each other over centuries, while human beings have been shifting plants and animals across continents since prehistory" (Clark, 2019, p.39). The emphasis in ecocriticism has now shifted to the global, or at least to the study of how global and local are interrelated. This change of focus appears with publications such as Ursula Heise's *Sense of Place & Sense of Planet* (2008), where she criticises the emphasis of environmental studies on the local, with research topics such as "Wordsworth and the lake district ... Thoreau and the woods of Massachusetts" (Clark, 2019,

p.39). However, such large-scale phenomena like rising temperatures, thawing permafrost, rising sea levels are difficult to render, in novels for example, because novels generally focus on the human, and are limited in terms of pages, making it difficult to take a planetary point of view.

Regarding the notion of time in ecocriticism, scholars also study how a planetary vision of time, exceeding human history and acknowledging geological times, could be included in literary productions. In ecocriticism, the concept of “deep time” is linked to geological times and refers to “the immense arc of non-human history that shaped the world as we perceive it” (Farrier, 2016). One example of a study of literature with a broader consideration of time is Wai Chee Dimock’s “Deep Time: American Literature and World History” (2001), where she discusses the need to go beyond national literature – here, American literature – to look into world history, since the history of a nation is very limited when one studies phenomena which exceed the history of a nation (Dimock, 2001). This notion of deep time is part of the broader posthumanist school of thought since it seeks to consider more than just the human. Another concept useful for the study of time is the Anthropocene – not posthumanist, because centred on humans and their deeds. The Anthropocene refers to a new geologic era (following the Holocene) in which humans have become equal to geologic forces, since they are able to change how the earth is shaped and how it functions. For example, humanity has increased the average temperature of the Earth’s climate system, through its energy-demanding actions. On the one hand, if we were to compare deep time with the Anthropocene on a 24h-clock, humanity would have appeared at the last minute, thus putting into perspective the era of the Anthropocene, and the tendency to think humans as the centre of the world. However, on the other hand, the anthropogenic climate crisis shapes the earth in the same way the earth has been shaped through geological times, making humans’ force similar to that of geological changes which happened in deep time (Farrier, 2016). In the following paragraphs, I will detail how the three books of the chosen corpus deal with planetary or large-scale views to bring a less anthropocentric vision of the novel.

In chapter 1, *The Hidden Life of Trees* does not, at first sight, seem to deal with scale. The story is recounted in the present and although it states general truths about trees, and tries to reach a maximum of readers, the observations in the book are local, that is, in the forest of the district of Hummel. However, as Wohlleben tells the reader in his book, his personal observations in a forest in Germany are not dissimilar to other ones all across the world. Wohlleben studies

species that are not especially exotic, but some global concern shows, through the author citing some consequences of climate change on trees' environment and thus on their functioning. He cites for example the case of the "drunken trees" in Siberia (where the permafrost melted, causing the trees to tilt), or the deforestation in countries where forests are crucial to cool down temperatures in the land. Wohlleben's aim with this non-fiction book is also to reach a planetary audience to deliver his message. However, the sense of time identified in *The Overstory*, in regards with time as experienced by trees, is absent here: Wohlleben's trees as said in chapter one, become "human" through the anthropomorphic language, and we sometimes lose this sense of otherness of these beings, which comes amongst other things with that particular sense of long time. This novel is thus more about the local, the careful observation of a particular place, and the personal experience of the woods than about the global, even if it addresses these matters from time to time.

In chapter 2, *The Overstory* has been defined as a maximalist novel. Several characteristics of this maximalist novel – such as the encyclopaedic aspect of the book, its length, and the way it tries to encompass a world within itself – tend towards a broader vision of the world, an inclusion in the book of more elements than a novel generally contains. However, the novel is not really part of the planetary turn, since the plot is set in America, and references to other part of the world (like Vietnam) are cited in relation to American history (the Vietnam War). The novel brings together personalities of very different background, making the case for diversity, but still, there novel remains local since the plot never leaves America. The novel sometimes refers to older times, but it does so in the aim to include trees' sense of time in the novel: for example, the Hoel chestnut tree sees generations of Hoel family members; when Douglas falls from an airplane and that he lands on a banyan tree, the narrator recounts how the tree's life started: "Miles below and three centuries earlier, a pollen-coated wasp crawled down the hole at the tip of a certain green fig and laid eggs all over the involute garden of flowers hidden inside" (Powers, 2019, p.101). Then the narration explains how "Decades passed. Centuries. War on the back of elephants gave way to televised moon landings and hydrogen bombs" (Powers, 2019, p.101). Trees in this novel extend the timeline of the human story, not to geological times, but at least to tree time, which helps taking some distance from human life, as will be covered in the posthumanist section of this chapter.

In chapter 3, we have seen that *Barkskins* has been portrayed as an impressive account of 300 years of history, with a plot that also moves around the globe: in Europe, China, New-Zealand

and South America. It thus combines scales of time and space. *Barkskins*'s choice of a three-hundred-year frame could possibly refer to the lifespan of a given tree, but it also conveniently encompasses the birth of capitalism. *Barkskins* takes more or less the birth of Capitalism and the Anthropocene as the starting point of the plot, and follows the unfolding of it throughout the novel. However, *Barkskins* is quite critical of this period since the characters, as said in chapter 3, are easily discarded, and the narration passes on quickly to other characters. The use of space as well shows how Capitalism and its ways colonise the world progressively. The use of time and space are not like in *The Overstory* a way to encompass the world in thorough and balanced way, but space and time here focus on a crucial turning point in history and its consequences for the planet. Here again, *Barkskins* is not entirely a planetary novel, since the time reference it takes is Capitalism, that is, human history, but is the most posthuman work of the chosen corpus.

On the one side of the continuum, *The Hidden Life of Trees* represents a very "local" non-fiction, which emphasises careful observation of local species with a certain affection towards nature. On the other hand, *Barkskins* takes the opposite perspective by zooming out on the human world and showing capitalism' evolution and expansion on the world map. In *The Overstory*, notions of time arise when dealing with trees: trees in *The Overstory* bring the narration away from the sole present.

3. *Posthumanism, Characters and Death*

As mentioned above, questions of scale automatically involve posthumanist considerations. Posthumanism is a "newly gained awareness of the limits of previous anthropocentric and humanistic assumptions", which considers all living beings as equal, without any hierarchy (Ferrando, 2020, p.29). Larger frames of time and space move the focus off-centre, away from the human character's story, to encompass other living beings within that frame. This is especially relevant for the authors in our corpus, since they try to grab the reader's attention and to direct it on trees. This leads us to analyse how human characters are depicted in comparison to trees in these books, and as a consequence how posthumanist these are. The two novels of the corpus have human characters in their plots, but that does not mean that a novel without human characters would be less anthropocentric. In fact, attempts to make trees the

only characters are not especially prone to be less anthropocentric: writing in the place of animals or trees falls within the role of imagination, and writers are not immune from imposing their human experience of the world onto that of animals and trees, as has been seen in the first chapter. The question is then: how do these books balance anthropocentrism? How do they give enough space to trees without projecting human thoughts/feelings on them? How are the characters shown, be they trees or humans? What mutual influence is there between trees and humans? In the next two sections, I analyse how posthumanism shows through the use of characters, and then through the motive of death.

a. Characters

In *The Hidden Life of Trees*, the only “characters” are trees, which, through the anthropomorphic language are more or less turned into humans. Nonetheless, there is no real individuality in these trees, and they are made alive through the anthropomorphic language of the narration. Here the book focuses only on trees and other plants, but the book is probably the most anthropocentric and least posthumanist of the corpus, since trees are anthropomorphized.

In *The Overstory*, each character is associated with a particular tree, which hints towards the interpretation of equality and interconnection between humans and trees. The narration clearly takes a posthumanist point of view when it states: "This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees where humans have just arrived" (Powers, 2018, p.530). Some trees resemble characters to a certain extent – they do not talk or interact, but they stand separately enough from the descriptions of nature to be considered as characters. These trees are the Hoel Chestnut tree, as well as the giant redwood tree called Mimas in which Oliva and Nicholas live in order to defend the territory. With *The Overstory*, Powers still chooses to use human characters whose lives form the plot of the book, but at the same time balances this humanity by associating it with trees.

Barkskins is the opposite: the numerous human characters, and the trees, have no individuality. All the characters are discarded all together, highlighting the broader perspective rather than the individuals.

The fact that *The Overstory* does not get rid of the characters altogether like *Barkskins* makes it more reader friendly. It teaches the reader that trees are valuable, complex living beings which are connected to our lives; it is not particularly posthumanist in the sense that there are still

strong human characters in the book, but rather because decentres the humans in the book by entangling their lives with trees. It reaches a broad audience but at the same time, it is not as anthropocentric as *The Hidden Life of Trees*.

b. Death

The relative importance of the human characters vs the tree in the corpus has just been measured. In the three books which have been analysed, death plays an important role, to rebalance the inequality between the human characters and the trees.

Regarding *The Hidden Life of Trees*, it has been demonstrated in the previous chapters how trees are anthropomorphised by the language used in the non-fiction book. In this sense, trees resemble human characters – they suffer and die like humans. This ethics of trees, based on a relative resemblance in their suffering, echoes Anat Pick's idea of « creaturely », which grounds an ethics between animals and humans based on the similarities of their bodies, and how equally vulnerable they are. We often oppose the intelligence of humans to the « pure necessity, material bodies » of animals, but humans have bodies and suffer too (Pick, 2011, p.4). Creatures are « living bodie[s], material, temporal, and vulnerable ». (Pick, 2011, p.5). Trees are not sentient beings like animals and humans, they do not feel themselves suffering, or at least they suffer in a different way. Wohlleben also demonstrates that trees, even if they can live for a long time – he cites the oldest tree on earth, Old Tjikko, 9500 years old – are also vulnerable to attacks coming from their environment. Wohlleben bridges the gap between trees' experience of the world and that of humans, through anthropomorphic language, which conveys the idea of a similar way of suffering. Even if trees have usually a longer lifespan than humans, they are vulnerable like humans, and the fact that they can die at any moment brings trees and humans together.

The Overstory features very sudden deaths of mostly secondary characters; Patricia Westerford's father dies in a car accident, Nicholas Hoel's parents and grandmother all die from the cold of the winter while Nicholas had only left them for a few hours. Death is also present in the lives of the main characters: Olivia is electrocuted and dies, but is reborn in a quasi-religious way soon after. In *Barskins*, all the characters and especially the main characters die of sudden but also violent deaths; which is related to the naturalist and determinist tone of the novel. René Sel is murdered with an axe, James Duke freezes on a boat.

In the two novels, death and vulnerability are generally used to put into perspective the relative importance of humans on earth, to lessen the anthropocentrism of the novel. These sudden deaths indicate how humans' lives are relatively short as compared to that of trees, which can live for several hundreds of years. These two novels are still traditional in the sense that they involve human characters, trees are not the main characters of the novel. In *The Overstory*, the death of humans shows contrast with the longevity of trees and the earth, while in *Barkskins*, death relativises all of humans' lives – not only the Sels' – in the face of history and capitalism.

As a conclusion of this section on posthumanism, it can be said that a certain posthumanist idea infuses every work of the corpus: in *The Overstory*, trees and humans appear more or less as equal and interrelated, their lives cannot be disconnected, humans die abruptly, and a longer sense of time related to trees is included in the novel. In *Barkskins*, trees and humans are also connected in the sense that they are treated with the same disdain, they are equal in their insignificance; almost all the characters die abruptly and the bigger picture matters more than the individual human. In *The Hidden Life of Trees*, it could be argued that trees become equal to us through the anthropomorphic language, even though this use of language diminishes tree's essence; Wohlleben also emphasises their vulnerability in order to make comparisons with humans. The question is more how on the overall the novel infuses that posthumanism and how this can serve to a potential reevaluation of what trees are for us in our lives. On the whole, the reader "bonds" less with the trees in *Barkskins*, and to a certain extent in *The Overstory* as well, because they are seen through the narrator or the characters' eyes, they are not given a proper voice. However, both novels keep this sense of otherness, of mystery about trees, while *The Hidden Life of Trees* focuses on the similarities between trees and people through the anthropomorphic language.

Conclusion

This master thesis began with the observation that the study of plants and most importantly that of the human-plant relationship in the ecocritical field was still little studied. The symbolism of the forest, as well as the place of forests in humans' imaginary has been thoroughly discussed, but the study of the link between trees and humans remains a minor subject of study. It is necessary to study this relationship and the books that promote it because our society still considers trees as living beings which can be used at our convenience. This is why this master thesis sought to analyse how authors who address the issue of deforestation and the climate crisis in general promote the human-tree relationship, or at least how they highlight trees so that readers can finally understand trees as complex living beings. In the first chapter, an ontological and metaphysical gap between humans and plants was identified, which raised questions about how to bring such different entities into closer contact. Therefore, the aim was to study the literary techniques with which the authors of books about trees try to address this relationship and to bridge this gap. The first chapter focused on the anthropocentric language and the debate around it in *The Hidden Life of Trees*. The second chapter examined *The Overstory* and how a maximalist novel tries to find a balance between tree's representation and that of humans, and how it includes metafictional reflection on the climate crisis. The third chapter analysed *Barkskins* and the very different perspective it offers, since it does not seek to represent the trees but rather to show the joint destiny of the natives and the forest by imitating capitalist methods through its treatment of the characters.

To recapitulate, the three books of the corpus can be reduced to two different rhetorics. The first is that of wonder at nature (*The Overstory* and *The Hidden Life of Trees*). The second is a naturalistic point of view of deforestation and does not leave much hope (*Barkskins*). There are also two main aims: on the one hand *The Overstory* and *The Hidden Life of Trees* seek to reenchant nature and bring humans closer to it, make the reader feel connected to nature again, and on the other hand, *Barkskins* explains the historical, cultural and economic causes behind deforestation; the link between humans and trees is only a link of oppression. As for the mechanisms used, there was, for the first book, mainly a use of anthropomorphic language. Peter Wohlleben also used a vocabulary related to natural selection and mutual aid to make his trees more lively in our eyes, and emphasised trees' vulnerability to relate it to our own vulnerability. The second book also used anthropomorphic language and its opposite, the "vegetalising" of the human characters, as well as a plot which entangles the lives of each

character with trees so much that the story of the characters would be completely different without them. Powers also includes a longer sense of time (related to trees) in the novel, which contrasts with the abrupt deaths of the human characters. In the third book, as said above, the link was an historical link between the Natives and the forests: first a link of dependence (Native relying on food from the forest for their survival) and then a link of oppression after the colonisation of North America, the Natives being decimated similarly to how trees were cut down. Furthermore, it can be said that the novels had also more scope to play to discuss climate change, deforestation and humanity's behaviour towards nature. This could be seen through the analysis of *The Overstory* which managed to discuss varied topics related to deforestation, green activism, how art and writing can address etc. just with the intertext, but also used the structure of the book, and the narrative to interconnect trees and humans. *Barkskins* as well used two families in order to represent two different backgrounds and two different views of the world; three hundred years of history were squeezed in the novel, as well as the evolutions of mentalities towards the novel.

Apart from how the books of the chosen corpus handle the representation of trees, they also have different ways to address the climate crisis. Peter Wohlleben sporadically addresses the climate crisis in his non-fiction book; he sometimes comments on how trees' behaviour change with the effects of climate change. He is optimistic that people can build a kinder relationship with nature, but he tones down this optimism at the end of the book, and explains that there is a long way to go for humans to recognise that trees have some agency. *The Overstory* tried to represent different kinds of discourses in the face of the climate crisis: the informative, scientific discourse (represented by the omniscient narrator), the (extreme) activism of five of the characters, and midway between these positions, an ecostocist vision of the climate crisis. Finally, *Barkskins* offers little hope, since it shows that the characters cannot easily escape their destiny. Towards the end of the book, however, there is a message of resilience as the characters from a marriage between the Duke and the Sel families organise their efforts to reforest the country. But then again, the project is arduous and dangerous for the activists.

The last chapter assessed the extent to which the works in the corpus responded to a need, in ecocriticism, to address the scale at which climate change is occurring. The three books responded to this need in a mixed way: *The Hidden Life of Trees* is very local and *The Overstory* encompasses many things, but the scenario is based solely in America. Only *Barkskins* is able to show the global nature of the crisis through the expansion of capitalism to every corner of

the earth. Another aspect discussed was the temporality of the book, and we noticed that both novels of the corpus refer to a longer period of time: in *The Overstory*, the presence of trees brings history back to the past, while in *Barkskins*, the historical perspective is closer to the longevity of a tree. The posthumanist nature of the three works in the corpus has also been analysed. Posthumanism is inherent of these books because they try to foreground, or put on the same level, other species than the human species. *The Hidden Life of Trees* and *The Overstory* were relatively posthumanist in the sense that they emphasize the life of trees even though humanity still has an important role in these two books. *Barkskins* is the most posthumanist of these three books since the human characters are relatively insignificant.

The posthumanist nature of an ecofiction is one thing, but the important issue here is to change people's conception of nature. For this, even if *The Overstory* and *The Hidden Life of Trees* do not really meet the ecocritical criteria of planetary scale and time as well as posthumanism, they re-enchant our vision of nature and seek to break the stereotype of the passive and uninteresting plant. Even if *Barkskins* is highly detached from humanity, it does not help to build a caring imaginary of the forest. It does, however, offer a good summary of the history of deforestation in America, of capitalism, and of the oppressions that Native Americans have suffered and are still suffering. *The Overstory* and *The Hidden Life of Trees* seem more effective in the aim of changing our imaginary of nature since they have been more successful – in terms of number of readers, and translations in the world – than *Barkskins*. A totally posthumanist novel is probably impossible and even *Barkskins* does not get rid of the human characters entirely.

Michael Marder said that plants embody limits to empathy and that we risk erasing the specificity of trees if we use empathy towards plants, because we are not capable of understanding their vision of life since it is ontologically and metaphysically different. We have seen that this is true, at least in *the Hidden Life of Trees*, that a heavy use of anthropomorphic language risks to erase the plants' unique intelligence. On the other hand, it has also been observed that books like Peter Wohlleben's have a huge audience and can thus participate in the shift in our imaginary needed to slow down the climate crisis. Perhaps a good midway between a too anthropomorphic book and a too posthumanist novel is *The Overstory*, since it tries to show how humans are influenced by trees without being too anthropocentric.

This study, as explained in the introduction, was limited because of the number of literary work studied. It was not possible to generalise the observation made about trees in ecofictions or the

human-tree relationship and the literary mechanisms used to reenchant our vision of nature. However, this leaves to other study the possibility to examine systematically fiction and/or non-fiction on trees and see if the techniques used to portray and foster a human-tree relationship are repeated through these books.

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