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DiSLL

Università degli Studi di Padova

Via E. Vendramini, 13

35137 Padova

Italy

[europiansouth@postcolonialitalia.it](mailto:europiansouth@postcolonialitalia.it)

*Cover Image:* Tamsin van Essen's ceramic sculpture 'Entangled Roots'.

Originally commissioned for the 2023 exhibition *Finding Family*, the Foundling Museum has acquired it for their permanent collection. 'Entangled Roots' interweaves the formal structure of a genetic family tree with extended blood lines and social threads to form a complex and entangled network of biological and coincidental human interactions.

The journal has sent a formal request to the artist, asking for permission to use a photograph of her *Entangled Roots*. If the artist or anyone claiming copyright to this work/image wishes to contact us, please write to [redazione@fesjournal.eu](mailto:redazione@fesjournal.eu).

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# Caring in the ‘Thick Present’: environmental crisis, ethics of interconnectedness and posthuman ecologies in *The Overstory* by Richard Powers

Giuseppe De Riso

Università di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2018) as a fictional testament to Donna Haraway’s (2016) philosophical exhortation to ‘stay with the trouble’. Haraway’s imperative stems from the observation of a world increasingly threatened by humanity’s ravenous consumption of natural resources. She proposes that we reconceptualise environmental crises not as isolated catastrophes, but as integral components of a ‘thick’ present: a densely networked, symbiotic reality demanding innovative solutions and novel forms of coexistence and kinship. In *The Overstory*, this metaphor is extended by interweaving the lives of nine individuals, each of whom is uniquely connected to trees. In the midst of a global ecological crisis, their stories illustrate different approaches to engaging with our environment. By exploring the intricate relationships between humans, nature and technology, the novel argues for a broader definition of kinship transcending genetic lineage and anthropocentric ethics in order to emphasize mutual growth and transformation within the complex web of life by defining kinship beyond genetic lineage and anthropocentric ethics. As well as promoting a holistic perspective beyond ruthless exploitation and mere stewardship, it encourages us to cultivate a sense of connection and responsibility beyond ruthless exploitation.

## Keywords

anthropocentrism, Chthulucene, environmental crisis, kinship, trees, virtual reality

## Introduction: the dancing of becoming in the cauldron of crisis

In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), Donna Haraway explores the etymological roots of the term ‘trouble’ to illustrate that our contemporary times are characterised by widespread disruption and deep-seated unrest. The term dates back to the eighteenth century when it was used to describe agitation, confusion and restlessness. She links her exploration of the concept to the broader framework of the Anthropocene, the current geological epoch characterised by overt anthropogenic impacts on the Earth’s geomorphic and ecological systems. As Haraway combines the terms trouble and Anthropocene, she emphasizes the often turbulent interplay between human activities and the environment. The Anthropocene is thus reinterpreted not solely as ecological degradation, but also as an era rife

with substantial socio-epistemological uncertainty, multiple complexities, and a confluence of crises.

However, Haraway is critical of the Anthropocene as a designation, objecting to its implication of human exceptionalism as the predominant agent of planetary transformation, a “human-centredness syndrome” as defined by Val Plumwood (2009), which involves the “the hyperseparation of humans as a special species and the reduction of non-humans to their usefulness to humans” (Plumwood 2009). To correct this circumscription, she proposes ‘Chthulucene’ as a more appropriate epithet for our time. The neologism is a deliberate etymological fusion of the Greek *khthôn* (earth or the chthonic realm) and *kainos* (new, fresh) to describe the combination of suffering and potential that defines the present age. The Chthulucene is intended as a time characterised by humanity’s deep entanglement with a troubled earth, while at the same time holding possibilities for radical transformation and renewal. Haraway argues for a communal response to the pressures of our time, stressing the critical imperative of fostering relationships and connections across diverse species and communities, an effort she refers to as ‘making kin’. This practice entails the cultivation of “inventive connections [to] live and die well with each other in a *thick present*” (Haraway 2016, 1. Emphasis is mine). Haraway’s notion of kinship eschews the fences of consanguinity, inviting all manifestations of life into the fold. It is a call for the recognition of the vast archipelago of connections that binds all beings, each uniquely connected by unseen underwater bridges of interdependence. Indeed, Haraway links the concept of the Chthulucene to “hyphae” (Haraway 2016, 2), the networked, symbiotically thread-like structures formed by fungi, to metaphorically illustrate the interrelatedness of life beyond human-centric narratives. For Haraway, hyphae represent a world in which living things are enmeshed in mutually influential relationships, emphasising the importance of symbiosis, reciprocity and the complex connections that sustain life. Such a perspective challenges us to nurture these often invisible connections and promote a culture of mutual responsibility and care in a shared environment. This paradigm shift requires a move away from the arid deserts of solipsistic human-centricity towards a more holistic appreciation of existence that recognises the inherent value and agency of all living beings.

Incorporating Karen Barad’s (2007) agential realism, Haraway elaborates an onto-epistemological framework in which the present is re-imagined not as a mere chronological juncture but as a ‘thick’ landscape, densely woven with the strings of materiality, discourse, and ongoing processes. For Haraway, the present is a complex web of relationships, a palimpsest full of possibilities and challenges, shaped by the constant interaction between humans and non-humans. Consequently, the present appears as a multi-layered concept that encompasses the intricacies of everyday existence and forces us to see how our world is shaped by our choices. Haraway’s focus on making kin and cultivating the thick present as a

profound engagement with the here and now emphasises the need not only for personal mindfulness, but also for a collective awareness of our intertwined existence with the environment and other species that requires collaborative and sustainable efforts to address the environmental and social demands of our time.

Haraway's emphasis on trouble as a bubbling cauldron that harbours both adversity and opportunity places her in line with the intellectual lineage of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), particularly their concept of 'becoming' as expounded in *A Thousand Plateaus*. For the philosophers, becoming is not a teleological path to a predetermined end point, but an ongoing process of transformation in which entities are never static or unchanging, but always in flux. Similarly, Haraway views trouble as a driving force for continual change, adaptation, evolution, and remaining responsive to the evolving complexities of our world. The act of kinship formation as Haraway conceives it, requires a new form of "response-ability" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 2), an ethical stance that prioritises responsiveness and responsibility towards the multitude of life forms with which humans are inextricably imbricated, a landscape that extends far beyond the familiar bounds of biological ties. This commitment means dealing with the problems of the present instead of retreating into utopian fantasies of the future. It calls on us to accept our mortality and the transience of existence, and urges us to recognise meaning in the midst of transience. Haraway questions the common preference for escapism, the widespread tendency to imagine a secure future by erasing the problems of the present and the past. Such an approach neglects the unpredictable fruitfulness and indeterminacy of the present. To stay with the trouble, one has to live in the present with all its contradictions and possibilities. In addition to engaging with contemporary issues, it involves cultivating presence within "myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (Haraway 2016, 1).

Chthulucene is essentially a presence attuned to the now, understanding it as a place of resistance and transformation. It points out that our task in the world is not to dominate but to participate, not to control but to co-create the ceaseless flow of existence. The Chthulucene serves as a trope for a world in perpetual motion, where boundaries blur, hierarchical structures are dismantled and unforeseen alliances emerge. It is a realm in which the fates of the human and the non-human, the animate and the inanimate are interwoven in mutual dependence and transformation.

### **A narrative of care and connection**

In alignment with the themes outlined so far, Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) unfolds as an ecological narrative investigating the intimate dependencies between humans and trees. In the novel, we follow the interwoven stories of nine Americans, each of whom is uniquely shaped by his or her connection to trees. Together, they address the urgent issue of forest

decline as part of their diverse journeys and examine humanity's voracious exploitation of nature and our collective inability to engage sensibly with the environment. In this light, the novel contributes to addressing a critical concern that, as Amitav Ghosh elucidates in his 2016 work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change, and the Unthinkable*, remains still relatively undervalued in contemporary literary discourse. Yet Powers' critique is more than a condemnation. He suggests that these challenges present an opportunity to generate new knowledge and to foster more thoughtful relationships between humans and the natural world, which can even incorporate technological advancements. Indeed, the novel provides a glimpse into a reimagined world where humanity can potentially shed its anthropocentric perspective and embrace a kinship with all life forms, both organic and digital. This expanded view of kinship – a “new perspective on the world [...] in which humans are not the telos of the intricate webs of being” (Hess 2020, 190) – acknowledges the diverse intelligences that coexist on our planet, and concedes that even the silicon pathways of technology are but another branch on the ever-evolving tree of life. This analysis seeks to shed light on the manifold modes of kinship described in the novel, especially as viable responses to the ecological and existential predicaments of the present. Examining these diverse affiliations allows us to better understand how *The Overstory* not only queries human behaviour but also charts a course toward a more harmonious and reciprocal coexistence with nature.

The opening section of the novel, aptly titled “Roots”, introduces the fundamental concept that nature communicates with us through a language that exceeds verbal and visual limitations. Echoing David Abram's evocative portrayal of the land's unspoken tongues in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997) – whispers of wind and scent that have become muffled by the clamour of civilisation – this section paints a vivid tableau of an unnamed woman communing with a pine tree, her senses finely honed to the soft murmurs of the natural world. The evocative note, “Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies” (Powers 2018, 6), serves as a metaphor for a radical recalibration of our sensory receptors to the more-than-human world in order to truly connect with nature. This introductory passage is more than just a poetic vignette; it is an invocation to re-evaluate our perceptual and existential matrices. Powers invites us to engage with the environment on a more instinctive and visceral level, to decipher the “messages [and] words before words” (Powers 2018, 6) that resonate with ecological wisdom and existential truths through the rustling leaves, the sougling wind, and the creaking bark.

Consistent with Donna Haraway's call on multispecies kinship and a re-attunement of our senses to perceive and respond to the voices of “other critters” (2016, 3), Powers infuses his narrative with vivid instances of non-human communication: alders recount histories like ancient bards, walnuts extend “bribes” (Powers 2018, 7) in the form of delectable nourishment, and oaks become oracles of enigmatic futures not yet grasped by human understanding. This animistic portrayal paints nature as an active broadcaster, constantly emitting signals that often

elude our limited sensory bandwidth. Powers pinpoints a “root problem” (Powers 2018, 7) based on our constrained perception: we tend to fixate on the visible aspects of trees, their towering structures above ground, neglecting the vast subterranean networks that sustain them. Such a truncated perspective or narrow focus – ironically based on the epistemological paradigm of ocularcentrism (Jay 1988) re-attunement – limits our ability to fully grasp the interconnectedness of the natural world. The image of missing “half of it, and more” (Powers 2018, 7) evokes ecological philosopher Timothy Morton’s (2017) concept of the ‘mesh’, whereby “things are intimately interconnected in ways that render the whole idea of a thing hopelessly naive” (31).

In Powers’ narrative, the tree emerges as an “extended metaphor” (Masiero 2020, 137) for the kind of speculative fabulation made of string figures and *soin de ficelle* that Haraway (2016, 149) sees as consonant with the Chthulucene: its limbs and roots illustrate the journey of life, each branching representing a new path for the development of “material-semiotic [...] patterns and stories” (Haraway 2016, 50) within the broader landscape of existence. Though seemingly static, trees are depicted as intrepid explorers, their branches stretching skyward like inquisitive fingers and whose roots penetrate deep into the earthen womb, tentacularly seeking new connections with the unseen beneath the soil. Their sprawling drive for expansion and interconnectedness reflects the fundamental nature of life itself, echoing Haraway’s assertion that a network of connectivity is the only viable way to live. The nine protagonists of the novel, who are initially isolated, gradually become closer through their interactions with trees and their commitment to environmental protection. The branching patterns of the trees are woven into the structure of the novel and serve as a double metaphor for temporal progression and kinship. Like a single branch, each character’s life path unfolds independently, yet remains inextricably linked to the others through the ‘wood wide web’ of life (Simard 1997), a fine-grained system of experiences and bonds that transcend typical human lifespans and cognitive limitations.

For example, the Hoel family’s multi-generational project to photograph a chestnut tree, spanning over a century, resulted in a time-lapse film that presents a stark contrast between the hectic pace of human life and the calm, measured unfolding of nature. In March 1903, John Hoel began the practice of taking a picture of the tree every month from an unchanged perspective. This ritual is conscientiously continued by his descendants, resulting in a roll of film that documents the unhurried history of the tree. Those accumulated photos illustrate the contrast between humanity’s fleeting dramas and the tree’s patient growth. The way Powers manipulates chronological time makes human events fly by like shadows against the stoic tree backdrop, a silent witness whose apparent stillness belies its steady, purposeful progress, an “invisible plan” (Powers 2018, 280) unfolding on a timescale far beyond human comprehension. This “oldest, shortest, slowest, most ambitious silent movie ever shot in Iowa”



(Powers 2018, 16), as Powers describes it, compresses time into a digestible format that human observers can grasp, allowing us to peer into the majestic temporal scale of the tree: an arboreal chronotope, in Bakhtinian terms (1981), against which human lives flicker and fade. This shift in pace is a cornerstone of critical posthumanism, which argues for a decentring of the anthropocentric perspective in order to recognise the very different time scales of other beings. Powers encourages us to decelerate and adjust to the slower “speed of wood” (Powers 2018, 18) in order to question our assumptions about what enduring meaning is. Ultimately, the Hoel family’s centennial documentation project is about more than recording; it is about connecting with the deeper meanings that lie beyond the ephemeral concerns of life. It is a quest for the ‘whys’ surrounded by the labyrinthine vagaries of human fate and nature’s seemingly unfathomable workings.

Powers’ fascination with life’s often mysterious entanglements is exemplified by the story of Douglas Pavlicek, a former Air Force pilot. His life is miraculously saved by a centuries-old banyan tree’s enveloping branches when his plane is shot down over Thailand. Douglas’ accidental rescue is a calculated narrative decision designed to foster a sense of kinship between man and nature. This kinship is built upon recognising and honouring the unpredictable interdependence of all living beings that sustains the lattice of life, “the yoking together of companion species” (Haraway 2016, 124) that bursts the frame in which human scales of time and space are contained. Douglas’ experience of deforestation upon returning to America deepens his understanding of these connections. As he looks at the devastated landscapes of the clear-cut hillsides in Oregon, once bursting with green life, he is shocked by mankind’s rapacious appetite for resources. Reforesting these areas with Douglas fir seedlings – trees bearing his own name – becomes his act of atonement and defiance. With his loving care, he “tucks each one in” (Powers 2018, 85), emphasizing man’s nurturing relationship with nature as opposed to the extractive interactions that led to the clear-cut. His parting words to the saplings, a gloomy prophecy with a hint of hope, illustrate the profound realisation of the temporal discrepancy between the lifespan of humans and trees: “Hang on. Only ten or twenty decades. Child’s play, for you guys. You just have to outlast us. Then no one will be left to fuck you over” (Powers 2018, 85). Douglas uses a sombre but poignant metaphor here, suggesting that the saplings need only weather the temporary storm of human destruction – just a blink of an eye in their long lifetimes – to eventually reclaim their rightful place in a posthuman landscape.

In the novel, psychologist Adam Appich eloquently illuminates a critical blind spot intrinsic to human cognition: we are ill-equipped to perceive slow changes, particularly when juxtaposed with immediate, attention-commanding stimuli. We cling to the present moment, often absolutizing it, because of our inability to perceive the incremental processes of nature. Simons and Levin (1997) correlate this phenomenon to a psychological bias they term ‘change

blindness’, the propensity to overlook the subtle brushstrokes of change on the immense canvas of Earth’s timescales, like the slow tectonic creep of continents or the gradual pace of species’ evolution – what Roman Krznaric (2020) refers to as ‘deep time’ or Fernand Braudel as *longue durée* (1958) – while being captivated by the dramatic shifts or the sudden thunderclap seizing the present moment. This bias towards prioritising the immediate has severe consequences for environmental cognizance and action, fueling the pervasive short-termism that dominates contemporary social and political thinking. Similarly, the concept of “slow violence,” introduced by Rob Nixon (2011), describes the encroaching, often invisible harm inflicted by humanity on the natural world, which underlies myriad ecological crises, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and soil degradation. Yet, due to its lack of immediacy and salience, this damage builds so slowly that it escapes the perceptual acuity of both the public and policy makers, preoccupied with the more pressing demands of everyday concerns or enthralled by the allure of sensational news.

However, the acceptance of plants as active participants in the great theatre of life requires a reassessment of the ethical implications of our actions. The novel exposes the often unprovoked cruelty and dishonesty that permeate human behaviour, especially when it is driven by self-interest. This ethical dilemma is illustrated through the depiction of systemic corruption within law enforcement agencies, which are portrayed as instruments of powerful business organisations. Such a collusion creates an uneven playing field subjecting environmental defenders to intimidation, violence, and even torture. In response to this injustice, five characters – ceramic engineer Mimi Ma, resigned student in Actuarial Science Olivia Vandergriff, artist Nick Hoel, Adam and Douglas themselves – unite in environmental activism. Their acts of sabotage against logging equipment are desperate efforts to “do what little they could to stop the race from killing itself” (Powers 2018, 293). The scientific community is not exempt from this perfidy. Patricia Westerford’s groundbreaking research on arboreal aerial communication is initially met with ridicule and professional ostracism by a dismissive counter-article, effectively sabotaging her career. However, her work is eventually vindicated and recognised for its pioneering potential. The metaphor of her “words [...] drifting out into the open air, lighting up others, like a waft of pheromones” (Powers 2018, 125) vividly captures the pervasive impact of new ideas and the resilience of truth to overcome adversity. Patricia demonstrates plants are not passive objects but beings imbued with volition, cunning, and aspirations: “plants are willful and crafty and after something, just like people” (Powers 2018, 197). This perspective critiques the anthropocentric hubris that blinds humanity to the agency of non-human life forms: “[We are] Plant-blind. [...] We only see things that look like us” (Powers 2018, 107). Patricia’s insights reveal a shared lexicon of survival among all life forms, articulated not in spoken words but in the silent poetry of growth, collaboration, and experimentation. The subplot involving Olivia’s tragic demise in a planned arson attack in Idaho

precipitates Adam in a Faustian bargain to betray a comrade for a lighter sentence, driven by his wife's plea to prioritise their son's future; a reflection of the evolutionary drive to safeguard one's offspring and genetic legacy, as outlined by Hamilton (1964). Adam's agonising decision to protect Mimi instead reveals a profound "ecosophical" (Riem 2021, 29) epiphany about the broader implications of their shared cause. His personal interests give way to a more inclusive vision that considers the welfare of all life forms, embodying principles of ecofeminism and deep ecology (Naess 1973; Warren 1990), where the web of kinship expands to encompass both human and non-human entities, as well as the broader environment.

Powers positions his narrative as a cautionary tale (Allardice 2018; Gillette 2017) against the corrosive effects of unchecked greed on our moral values, advocating for a paradigm shift in our understanding of kinship. His storytelling explores the need to redefine the relationships between humanity and the natural world by delving deep into themes of loyalty, moral boundaries, and the tug-of-war between individual and communal obligations. Adam, a frequent target of bullying as a child, is baffled by his peers' unwarranted cruelty. Seeking solace in nature, he observes a colony of ants, a microcosm of emergent hive mind that functions as a self-organising unit and challenges our anthropocentric notions of intelligence, where individual achievements often overshadow collective wisdom. Adam's realisation that "nobody's in charge" (Powers 2018, 52) yet the colony thrives, triggers a speculative inquiry into the nature of consciousness and the potential for intelligences that differ radically from human cognition: "Something so different from human intelligence that intelligence thinks it's nothing" (Powers 2018, 52). This observation provides a sharp relief to the hierarchical, competitive structures of human society that have left him bruised and disenchanted, inviting a deeper reflection on the viability of 'healthy' alternatives to human propensity for destructive self-harm and ecological havoc. Addressing the psychological barriers to sustainable living, Powers highlights the paradox of human behaviour, which operates under the false pretence of limitless abundance despite the reality of finite resources. He identifies this unsustainable exploitation of Earth's limited resources as a precursor to inevitable ecological collapse (a concern also highlighted by Meadows, 1972). Powers points to the 'bystander effect' as a compounding factor, a psychological phenomenon whereby individuals in large groups are less likely to take action, assuming someone else will. This diffusion of responsibility, like a "dense fog of mutual reinforcement" (Powers 2018, 203), creates a collective paralysis (Latane and Darley 1968) even in the face of clear danger or impending crisis: "The larger the group [...] the harder it is to cry, Fire" (Powers 2018, 274). When confronted with harsh ecological realities, our inability to escape entrenched patterns of thought and behaviour fuels a cycle of crisis and destruction (Festinger 1957). The misuse of human intelligence for the infliction of harm and self-annihilation chillingly echoes Günther Anders' (1980a; 1980b) concept of the

'Promethean discrepancy', where our technological prowess has far outpaced our moral compass.

Powers' plea goes beyond ecological lamentation. He suggests a radical rethinking of our social and cognitive structures and asks whether humans could gain more strength and resilience through a decentralised mode of existence, following the cooperative model of ants. Could we learn to value diversity and connectedness over individualism and competition? In the novel, an intellectual property lawyer, Ray Brinkman, challenges the anthropocentric assumption that only humans deserve rights and dignity. The intellectual property lawyer proposes a broader, ecological approach to law that sees plants, animals, and humans as one organism. Brinkman's analogy of the human mind as a developmental stage of the earth is particularly compelling, since it paves the way for more forms of kinship beyond exploitative relationships that reduce nature to mere resources for human consumption, and for a symbiosis that involves responsible technological advancement.

### **Tentacular thinking: a vision of posthuman ecologies**

The theme of posthuman ecologies is explored through the story of Neelay Mehta, the son of Indian immigrants, whose entry into the digital world is triggered by a simple computer kit given to him by his father Babul when he was young. In this early phase of the digital revolution, Babul prophetically equates the potential of a tiny seed to topple a temple with the transformative power of a small computer that can blossom into a vast repository of human knowledge. The meticulous construction of their first computer is portrayed not just as a technical labour, but as an act of love akin to the procreation of a new life form, a digital progeny brought into being by human ingenuity. Neelay's impatience with the constant drumbeat of Moore's Law, which predicts a constant doubling of computing power, reveals his desire for accelerated technological progress. His constant quest for more RAM, MIPS and pixels epitomises an unquenchable thirst for ever more powerful tools to design social interactions and infrastructures with technological finesse. Building a computer isn't just a matter of assembly; it is a genesis that takes programming from a mechanical exercise to a creative act that breathes life into silicon.

The story takes a surprising turn when Neelay gets paralyzed by a tree accident, an ironic reversal of Douglas' life-saving encounter. Despite his paralysis, Neelay makes an outstanding career as a programmer, liberated from conventional constraints. His paralysis teaches him to view his body as an 'avatar', an external representation of his true essence, which resides inside his mind and soul. His goal is to develop a video game series called *Mastery*, a virtual Eden where players can assume any identity they want. Dreams can take root and flourish in these games, which are like complex ecosystems not constrained by physical limitations. In Neelay's story branching plays a central role, as it does in botany and

in computing. As trees spread their roots and shoots to nourish a diverse ecosystem, Neelay's code spreads to create huge virtual worlds. The metaphor of the tree as "a passage between earth and sky" (Powers 2018, 52, 54) epitomises the role of technology in bridging the tangible and the ethereal, in anchoring imagination and creative thought to reality. This is a theme close to Powers, as noted by Masiero (2020). Powers had already taken it up in *Orpheus* (2014), an earlier novel in which musician Peter Els attempts to transform the imperceptible patterns of DNA into auditory expression. Neelay's work goes way beyond just making games or entertainment; it is an act of creating worlds that expand the scope of human experience. The point of Neelay's games is to "keep playing" (Powers 2018, 170), like the natural instinct of branches to grow and multiply, encouraging continuous exploration and interaction. The paths in his virtual worlds are endless, with each journey going in a different direction. Through this digital chemistry, Neelay skilfully transforms the raw data of binary code into rich, interactive stories that sustain life in the digital ecosystem.

Neelay's narrative takes another unsettling slant, however, when he realises that his virtual utopia, created as a refuge from the mundane to spark unbridled creativity, is unintentionally overshadowed by exploitation, power struggles and greed – the same societal scourges and ills it sought to escape. This insight is triggered by a disillusioned player who identifies a Midas problem within the game. Like the mythical king whose golden touch ultimately threatened his own survival, players in *Mastery Online* are trapped in an endless cycle of accumulation depriving their virtual lives of meaning and purpose. Powers' observation that "human history [is] the story of increasingly disoriented hunger" (2018, 21), suggests that humanity's relentless quest for 'more' – even beyond basic needs – is a fundamental trait driving historical progress and social dynamics: "A reporter once asked Rockefeller how much is enough. His answer: Just a little bit more. And that's all we want: to eat and sleep, to stay dry and be loved, and acquire just a little bit more" (Powers 2018, 376). While this relentless craving propels progress, it also perpetuates inequality and environmental degradation. As Powers points out, material gains can't satisfy deep existential needs, despite humanity's material abundance: "Life is so generous, and we are so... inconsolable. But nothing I can say will wake the sleepwalk or make this suicide seem real. It can't be real, right? I mean, here we are, all still" (Powers 2018, 377). He eloquently delineates the detrimental repercussions of unchecked consumption, both in an ecological context and within the confines of a densely populated virtual simulation, and thus a fundamental paradox of the human condition: we possess sophisticated cognitive abilities yet are hampered by deeply ingrained social instincts. This duality is evidenced in the work of Tversky and Kahneman (1974), who have meticulously catalogued the numerous cognitive biases that distort our decision-making. These biases, relics of ancient heuristics once essential for survival, now hinder us as rusty cogs in the complex machinery of modern life. Like a computer running outdated software, our brains are

saddled with “legacy behaviours and biases” (Powers 2018, 58), struggling to meet the complex demands of contemporary life. Powers goes on to paint us as “sly, social-climbing opportunists” (Powers 2018, 58), who construct social frameworks as elaborate mazes of manipulation and rivalry, a bitter fruit borne from our evolutionary ascent. The Swiftian emphasis on our social instincts being both blessings and curses shows up again and again in Power’s exploration of human nature.

Neelay’s solution is to create a virtual world that follows natural law. This “new Age of Exploration” (Powers 2018, 346) is intended to mirror the evolution of biological life and prioritise cooperation and ecological balance. Interestingly, in this virtual environment, high above Adam’s prison (a symbol of human constraint), a new form of kinship emerges. Humans and artificial intelligence (AI) entities merge, evolving into hybrid beings equipped with instinctive behaviours to “look, listen, taste, touch, feel, say, join” (Powers 2018, 409). They are compelled to explore, communicate, and collaborate. This confluence of technology and nature, where digital entities emulate the vital functions of organic life, is a tribute to the kind of “tentacular thinking” that Haraway (2016, 30) endorses as representative of the Chthulucene as an alternative to “human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics [that do not allow] the best biologies of the twenty-first century [to] sustain the overflowing richness of biological knowledges” (Haraway 2016, 30). Neelay’s digital progeny exchange information and integrate their “cells” (Powers 2018, 419), “absorb everything [and] eat every scrap of data” (Powers 2018, 419), and even “think like rivers and forests and mountains” (Powers 2018, 411), effectively underscoring their capacity to reach out, grasp and tangle seemingly disparate modes of knowledge and narrative, bridging human linguistic constructs with the more elusive “language of green things” (Powers 2018, 411). Their initial communication with the natural world, a tentative “Hello” (Powers 2018, 89), marks the dawn of a new multisensory, multidirectional, richly networked era of “collective knowing and doing[,] an ecology of practices” (Haraway 2016, 34) aimed at tackling environmental challenges and fostering a sustainable future.

Neelay’s intricate interplay of creation is a narrative of human progress in which biological and digital developments are interwoven as integral parts of a purposeful narrative of adaptation and growth. His initiative is not just about coding, but about cultivating new forms of life in the digital realm. While Powers’ novel does not directly address the prospective changes to human experience in a digital epoch – for example, the shifting contours of sexuality under transhuman conditions – it nonetheless hints at an underlying intelligence in which technology plays a fundamental role in the uninterrupted narrative of nature. In this conceptualisation, the cybernetic empyrean emerges as a vital branch of the “massive tree of life” (Powers 2018, 407), an evolutionary outgrowth of human intellect, so long as it is not misconstrued, as is often the case, as merely a virtual simulacrum of the material realm. Such



a misunderstanding, as previously discussed, would risk reintroducing the very forms of subjective individualism that we should be seeking to transcend. Humans are both progeny, participants and facilitators of this evolution, acting as intermediaries in the continuous unfolding of both biological and technological realms. Powers ingeniously draws a parallel between the emergence of photosynthesis and Neelay's creation of a virtual ecosystem teeming with life. Just as that single, self-replicating cell harnessed the power of sunlight to transform Earth's toxic landscapes into thriving ecosystems for the propagation of diverse life forms, Neelay's digital platform cultivates a dynamic kinship between humans and AI, transforming human desires into digital realities. This silent symbiosis, blending flesh and code in mutual empowerment, heralds the transformative alchemy of trouble.

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**Giuseppe De Riso** is a researcher in English Literature at the University of Naples 'L'Orientale', where he received his PhD in Cultural and Postcolonial Studies of the English-speaking World. He is the author of three monographs and numerous articles on the English literature of the Indian subcontinent, on English postmodernism and on the digital humanities. His current research focuses on the various declinations of English postmodernism, the processes of transmedia convergence and contamination in literature, as well as ethno-religious and gender issues in Anglo-Indian fiction. Email: [gderiso@unior.it](mailto:gderiso@unior.it)