

Abstract Care is the intimate and necessary labor required to sustain those who are dependent, but it is also about acting in ways that sustain other species and the lives of strangers distant in time and space. The COVID-19 pandemic shines a spotlight on the vulnerabilities and gaps in global care networks. It creates a crisis of care on multiple levels—the immediate, the dispersed, and the systemic—and it is exceedingly difficult to keep them all in focus. Although Richard Powers’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, *The Overstory* (2018), is not about illness or pandemic, it can illuminate varied scales of care at the level of form, by moving from individual stories that are the typical subject of literary realism to a grand vision of the webbed planetary systems—the environment, the internet, the global economy—in which they are enmeshed. This essay argues that, read through the lens of pandemic, the overstory of Powers’s novel is the networks of interdependency that have put the world in grave danger and that gesture to an uncertain future.

Keywords care, Richard Powers, interdependency, pandemic, environment

The best care is effortless, so transparent to those who give and receive it that we imagine ourselves as independent. When our care networks falter we become aware of the fragile webs of interdependency that bind us unevenly to one another. As I write, isolated with my family in a small apartment in New York City, a global pandemic shines a spotlight on the vulnerabilities and gaps in those care networks. Shorn of our usual support from caregivers, teachers, coworkers, and friends, we are left to care for one another. The streets are empty, except for a few delivery people and neighbors walking dogs. Ambulances race by every few minutes, sirens blaring. A tree blooms in the median on Broadway underneath our window. It was bare the last time my sons went to school; we have been confined for over a month. I have trouble with scale. Some minutes last forever,

and then suddenly the day is over. The recent past feels like a lifetime ago; I can't imagine the future. My anxiety telescopes from the immediate situation—how long our health, sanity, and supplies will last; how to juggle writing with remote-schooling for my disabled son; what would happen if his father and I both became sick—zooming out to the inequities that allow some to shelter in place while others are exposed, an overwhelmed healthcare system, and the planetary scope of suffering and death.

Pandemic creates a crisis of care on multiple registers, and it is exceedingly difficult to keep them all in focus. Care is the intimate and necessary labor required to sustain those who are dependent, but it is also about acting in ways that sustain other species and the lives of strangers distant in time and space (see Clement 1996; Fineman 2005; Gilligan 1982; Glenn 2010; Hamington 2004; Hochschild 2012; Kelly 2016; Kittay 1999; Kittay and Feder 2002; MacIntyre 1999; Noddings 2010; and Sevenhuijsen 1998). It is the immediate work, both paid and unpaid, of providing physical and emotional sustenance to those in need and unable to provide for themselves, but those actions are also nodes in a tenuous network of interdependencies. Pandemic has exposed layers, modalities, and connective networks of care that have been the subject of my research. The book I am writing is not about the current crisis, but my topic has become unexpectedly timely. I have been studying how narrative—with its capacity to access the lived realities of others but also to express the submerged and collective fears, anxieties, and desires of a culture—can illuminate problems with our current systems of care, why we fear and shun dependency, and how we devalue the work of caregiving. More hopefully, I also consider how narrative details the “art” of interdependency—the ingenuity and resourcefulness of dependent persons and their caregivers—and challenges the panicky rhetoric of catastrophe evoked by the growth of elderly and disabled populations. Rethinking such fundamental concepts as personhood, dependency, and the meaning of a good life requires a powerful act of imagination. My project is founded on a belief that we cannot produce a change in attitudes, cultural practices, or institutions of law and society without an underlying reorientation of how we imagine the value of a life. I argue that the social and political failures of modern care arrangements start with a failure of imagination and that solutions should begin with creative rewriting of prevailing narratives that stigmatize dependency and devalue care work. Stories about the meaning of caring and being cared for can

enable new approaches to problems in current systems of care and help to change collective attitudes about dependency and dependency work.

Richard Powers's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Overstory* (2018), would not immediately appear to be such a story. It is not about illness or pandemic, nor does it anticipate the events leading to our current crisis. Its most evident subjects are our relationship to trees and the devastating impacts of human activity on the environment. But reading it now, the novel gains new relevance. *The Overstory* is an epic that moves from individual stories that are the typical subject of literary realism to a grand vision of the webbed planetary systems—the environment, the internet, the global economy—in which they are enmeshed. As such, it helps me think about varied scales of care at a time of pandemic and how the crisis of public health is interconnected with the crisis of climate change. Read through the lens of pandemic, the overstory of Powers's novel is the webs of interdependency that have put the world in grave danger and that gesture to an uncertain future.

The Overstory represents varied scales of interdependency at the level of form. Trees in Powers's novel assume the status of what Timothy Morton (2013: 3) calls “hyperobjects,” entities that are “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” and thus confound conventional strategies of narrative representation. Powers represents disparities in scale at the level of form by weaving individual stories written in the mode of realist fiction into a branching, botanical structure of sections called roots, branches, crown, and seeds. His subject is the conventional novelistic one of human lives, but these lives are set within domains so immense and so miniscule they might otherwise seem unconnected to human activity. At the level of content, each of nine human plotlines converges with the stories of trees, many around activism to protect old-growth forest. These are framed by the “overstory” of the biosphere, with its botanical scales of time and space, subjectivity, and communication. At all levels, we encounter questions about care within and across species: how and when humans care for one another and for the nonhuman environment, the different approaches to care required to care for other humans and for trees, when these can be complementary and the often irresolvable contradictions that arise between them.

The Overstory depicts *immediate care* in the stories of individual human characters tending to one another. Their experiences embody a spectrum of dependencies extending from the all-encompassing

needs of infancy to the illusory independence and responsibilities of midlife to dependencies that come with advanced age. Care is a necessity because all bodies are vulnerable: some characters die young, some acquire disability- or age-related dependencies, and some take their own lives prematurely. Dependency relations between parents and children provide a foundation for networks of care that branch outward as characters grow and mature. Disabled characters like Neelay Mehta and Patricia Westerford flourish because of devoted parental care. Some forge caring relationships with spouses and life partners, although none with biological children of their own. Many also form memorable relationships with trees: a mulberry in the yard of the successful immigrant, Winston Ma; trees planted for each child in the Appich family; the banyan that catches Douglas Pavlicek when his plane is shot down in Vietnam; the oak that sends Neelay Mehta to his disabling fall; the vast chestnut on the Hoel family farm; and Mimas, the endangered old-growth redwood where environmental activists camp out for almost a year.

The plot most directly engaged with questions of human care begins with “two people for whom trees mean almost nothing” (64), intellectual property lawyer Ray Brinkman and his wife, Dorothy Cazaly, a stenographer. In an ironic twist, Dorothy, having rejected the self-sacrifice of motherhood, becomes her husband’s full-time caregiver after he is disabled by a stroke. This is an all-too-familiar story of life-saving medical technology that leaves Ray in a state of complete dependency. Visiting nurses come only “half as often as Dorothy needs” (371), and she chafes at the burden of caring for her husband. At first Ray longs for death, but with time he and Dorothy find a purpose appropriately scaled to their needs and abilities. His concentration on the immediate environment sharpened by paralysis, Ray becomes fascinated with the tree just outside his window. Attunement to this particular object grants him “the ability to see, all at once, in all its concurrent branches, all its many hypotheticals, this thing that bridges past and future, earth and sky” (470). When Ray realizes the tree grew from a seed the couple once tossed carelessly into the yard, he begins to think of it as their daughter. The couple finds a shared passion for learning about trees. Having bypassed biological reproduction, Ray and Dorothy imagine themselves as belonging to an interspecies family. They are loving and attentive parents who care for their offspring by allowing their yard to become so overgrown that eventually the city takes legal action against them. The final image of the couple comes from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, where the elderly Baucis and

Philemon are rewarded for caring for human strangers with an after-life as trees, “huge and gracious and intertwined. What we care for, we will grow to resemble. And what we resemble will hold us, when we are us no longer” (Powers 2018: 499). Initially the novel’s most banal characters, Ray and Dorothy, end on a note of mythic grandeur, having learned to care for one another and the environment in a way that endures beyond the span of an individual human life.

Ray and Dorothy engage in acts of interspecies care within their immediate environment. In the globalized world of *The Overstory*, such intimate relations are nodes in broader networks that connect communities, regions, and species across the planet. At this level, the novel attends to the challenges and possibilities of *dispersed care* for others we may never see or know. As Maidenhead, leader of a group of environmental activists, insists, “The world is full of welfares that must come even before your own kind” (462). Some characters find it easier to care for others more distant in time and space than to participate in intimate personal relationships. Adam Appich, who is bullied and ostracized as a child, finds meaning in the miniscule social order of insects and, later, in social science. When forced to decide between his family and his activist comrades, he chooses solidarity with the broader cause. The brilliant autistic, Neelay Mehta, has few meaningful intimates but develops a vibrant virtual reality platform that is deeply meaningful to users across the world. Patricia Westerford is shunned by classmates and, later, by fellow scientists but is among the first to understand the sociability of trees. She expresses care for future generations by preserving seeds of endangered plant species. Meanwhile, the group of radical environmentalists at the novel’s center attempts to care for the past by saving old-growth forests. Ultimately these characters are forced into hard choices about how to distribute their care, whether their loyalties lie with their immediate human circle or the broader cause of interspecies wellbeing. Some readers were disappointed the stories of those characters most committed to caring for more distant populations and species end in death or isolation (see Rich 2018; Jordison 2018).

As its title suggests, *The Overstory* also depicts a third level of relation, that of *systems*. A systemic view can reveal broader patterns of interdependency that encompass individuals and communities, but it also threatens to obscure the intimacies that make caring relations meaningful. Networks have been a consistent theme for Powers, who has experimented in previous novels, such as *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), *Galatea 2.2* (1995), *Gain* (1998), *Ploughing in the Dark* (2000),

and *Orfeo* (2014), with forms to represent individual human stories enmeshed in systems that extend across extrahuman scales of time and space.

In *The Overstory* the environment and transnational capitalism are competing biopolitical forces so immense they cannot be fully apprehended by the traditional novelistic form. Where Powers describes the ecosystem as a sustaining force, he uses violent language to convey the malignant effects of the global economy. On one hand, the primordial network of trees—its collective voice set off by italics—engages in the caring activity of “feeding and curing and sheltering more kinds of creatures than people know how to count” (4). On the other, a capitalist economy created by, but now beyond the control or imagination of, individual human actors swallows up family farms with “massive, managed, relentlessly productive monocrop factories” (17) or “a huge, swift kick that has dislodged the planetary system” (304). But as competing sources of vitality, these systems evolve, and other life forms emerge. Interspersed with the Manichean forces of capital and ecology is the more recent, virtual network created by the Internet, which is at once a tool of the industrial economy’s “gospel of endless growth” (276) and a resource for new forms of community that may one day bridge species divides by “translat[ing] between any human language and the language of green things” (496). In *The Overstory*, these vast systems have a longevity far beyond the minute historical blip that is the life of an individual human, or even the human species.

Reading *The Overstory* now, we can see pandemic as a symptom of another such system or hyperobject at the intersection of biology and culture. A virus operates on nonhuman scales of space and time. It is the smallest of microscopic particles, but one that has planetary impact. The sick and dead bodies that appear now are only belated evidence of infections that happened days or weeks ago. Like the systems described in *The Overstory*, the fact that viral networks operate on scales more microscopic and immense than the human does not make human activity, or the stories of individual persons, irrelevant. Viral replication is enabled by human activity. So too, care must take place at the scale of the human, and in this remarkable time, our most poignant and awesome stories are about acts of care.

The latest slogan for Dove soap directly links handwashing and care. Yes, this is capitalism tirelessly at work in search of fresh markets. But it also bespeaks a more salutary collaboration among corporations and public health to show how a simple act can be a deeply

meaningful acknowledgement of interdependency, a gesture of care for self and one's intimate circle but also for distant others and populations vulnerable to infection. A similar scalar logic is at work at the end of *The Overstory*, which finds Nick Hoel—his surname an expression of both completion and emptiness—finishing a work of land art in which downed trees spell out the word STILL. With this “word life has been saying, since the beginning” (502), the narrative gestures toward the immediacy of the present and a distant time when a human artifact will be overtaken by the environment: life systems tinier and vaster than human comprehension that also require the human medium of words for their expression.

Pandemic has rearranged the environment in ways that could not have been anticipated by Powers's novel. Interspersed with news of death and devastation are stories of ecological resilience: dolphins and swans reappearing in the waterways of Venice, elephants feasting on abandoned crops in Yunnan province. These turned out to be fake news (Daly 2020), but they speak to real longings for narratives of hope in a time of crisis. And more reliable sources are also documenting ecological effects of pandemic that include lowered carbon emissions, reduced air pollution in major cities, and clean water, if not playful animals, in Venetian canals. And there is photographic evidence of wild boars foraging in Corsica, mountain goats roaming the streets of a town in Wales, and buffalo walking a highway in New Delhi (Falconer 2020). We can read these stories as evidence of the natural environment recovering in the absence of humanity. But we can also read them with a more holistic view that sees humans as an inextricable part of the environment. Interdependency at work: as they attempt to care for one another, human populations are also impacting the climate in positive ways. Of course, we are living in a state of exception that is unsustainable. Perhaps the gradual opening of the economy will provide an opportunity to rebuild in more sustainable ways that extend from individual acts to investments in carbon-neutral industries. More likely, the severe economic downturn will distract attention and resources from the crisis of climate change and put the needs of the market above those of vulnerable populations and environments. Before all of this, in the present of Powers's parable that now seems like a distant past, the globe has been overtaken with monocultures “for the care and feeding of one species” (475). In *The Overstory*, agricultural crisis initiates cultural and biological change. “That's when the tree of life becomes something else again,” Powers's omniscient narrator intones. “That's when the giant trunk starts to

teeter” (475). We are certainly living at a time when the teetering is palpable, although whether it will give way to “something else,” and what its qualities will be, is a story yet to be finished.

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