The Didactic Novel of the Anthropocene: *The Overstory* (2018, Richard Powers) and *Greenwood* (2019, Michael Christie)

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Abstract: *By drawing on the tradition of the didactic novel, forest-centric fiction highlights the significance of sustainability practices in coming to terms with a climate-altered future. Arboreal fictions aim to enhance public understanding of scientific knowledge regarding climate change. The Overstory (2018, Richard Powers) and Greenwood (2019, Michael Christie) are narratorial feats of the sort, offering insight into either the lead-up to or the aftermath of weather-related catastrophe. Both novels serve as cautionary tales, critically examining climate change scepticism and/or denial. They emphasize the need for readers, rather than characters, to learn how to navigate the consequences of human-induced global warming. Ultimately, their plots rework interpretive complexities related to contemporary experiences of environmental calamity into moralizing public narratives.*

Keywords: *arboreal fiction; didactic novel; Anthropocene; The Overstory; Greenwood;*

Marked by the state of the natural world, reading 21st-century fiction often means being reminded of environmental decline. Literary perceptions of unsustainable development unfold against the backdrop of dire insecurity for human life caused by the (perceived) collapse of the natural world. Life on Earth is shown to be immiserated by the adverse effects of the complex interaction between various socio-economic and environmental elements. Within the tradition of didactic literature, novels like *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers and Michael Christie's *Greenwood* (2019) feature an intrinsically moralistic concern with weather apocalypse, which gives meaning to most recent dystopian fictions (Stableford 2010). As such, tree-centric literature aims to enhance public understanding of scientific knowledge regarding climate change. One way or another, climate change fiction can be thought of as literature that also happens to educate, rather than simply a didactic tool. This paper explores the interplay between pressing ecological issues and the narrative representation of (post)apocalyptic time. As cautionary tales, both novels address a sense of urgent challenge brough about by the impact of climate change, resource exploitation, and political activism.

Revisiting the "arboreal aesthetics of early modern literature" (Bladen) equates to the comeback of trees in the spotlight. They are central to *The Overstory* (2018) and *Greenwood* (2019) and offer insight into the prequel to weather-related apocalypse and its aftermath. As a side effect, their impact also results in something dubbed "literary tree fatigue" (Athitakis). Caught between conflicting views on nature's value and grief over irreversible weather disruption, they are expected to struggle with moral choice too. Ideas on and about artistic integrity are intended to inspire moral agency and a sense of ethical obligation among readers, with notions of literary relevance in the background (Chihaia xxvii).

Reconciling the conflicting perspectives of green growth and anti-growth positions engenders the literary discourse advocating for 'a-growth'. Essentially, this is delineated by eco-critical characters that do "not give priority to income growth over climate but [are] aimed at finding a true balance between all aspects of social welfare" (Bergh, Drews 62). The very idea of degrowth, "defined as the democratic transition to a society that – in order to enable global ecological justice – is based on a much smaller throughput of energy and resources" (Schmelzer et al. 4), proposes that climate goals can only be met by shrinking consumption and economies, while agrowth prioritizes sustainability.

Arguments for sustainability, combined with the certainty of climate change, provide ample narrative grounds for speculating on the fictional consequences of human-induced emissions. Their plot hinges on the ethical commitments that have always been the core of literary didacticism, an aesthetic tradition whose "popularity […] has given rise to the term cli-fi, or climate change fiction, and speculation that this constitutes a distinctive literary genre" (Johns-Putra 266). Climate literature, being shaped by its own context – i.e., the era of dramatic climate change (Johns-Putra and Sultzbach) – is revealing of teleological narratives (Burnett) on pre- and post-apocalyptic trials. Consequently, tree-inspired fiction entails timely knowledge communication about "events that took place following the advent of the Anthropocene in the late eighteenth century and its effects on succeeding centuries" (Merchant 25). Although formally rejected as a scientific label (IUGS), the Anthropocene epoch is effectively fictionalizing climate change at the very edge of the Holocene, deemed a reputable (and current) geological era.

Pondering on ethical concerns requires a fully conscious and stable authorial self that has taken upon itself the mission to generate consistent, sensible meanings. Much like didactic literature that used to "perpetuate[d] strict moral codes" (Havens 5), climate informed fictions institute climate literacy among readers who navigate their rapidly evolving world, one radically altered by human-caused climate change. Coming to the rescue of

the natural environment involves alternative development models that seem to often ignore their own consequences since they are bound to induce poverty among fictional characters and readers alike.

The ethical and emotional meanings of narrative eventfulness related to climate change reveal impending doom whereas the long-hoped story of technological transformation (meant to at least secure present-day living standards) often seems a matter of giving credibility to ideas that are hardly testable by empirical means. Effectively, both "facts" and "emotions are not enough" (Hoydis et al. 15-19) to achieve the engagement of audiences. However, woodland-themed fiction promises to make scientific climate change relatable: it aims to present a more experiential and immersive experience, while fostering a sense of urgency. Climate-change responsibility in literary settings, i.e., arguing for social and individual action to try and mitigate (or even reverse) the effects of greenhouse gas, is nevertheless mired in a battle of conflicting socio-cultural narratives. Through various forms of juxtaposition, allusion, and symbolization, readers are insistently prodded towards embracing concepts of sustainability; this adds to the meanings of "(literary) tree fatigue" in ways that should expose the rhetorical pitfalls (Schneider-Mayerson et al.) of narrative concern for the survival of the human species.

What Is Arboreal Aesthetics Good For?

Both novels can be read as two influential instalments in the grand "epic of the Anthropocene" (Selcer 1). Their plots are placed in counterfactual contexts that would require readers consenting to the core idea of sustainability in the first place. If this is not the case, both novels make the case that literature is limited not only by audience reach, but, primarily, by the readers' willingness to take in the premise that human made carbon emissions are reason enough for minimizing waste and embracing energy-saving strategies. The relevance of the narrative address references such public policies, which are highly detrimental to consumerist lifestyle choices and result in dramatically reframing perceptions of comfort and wealth.

Knowledge communication through literary storytelling looks back on the genre of the didactic novel whose authors "intend[s] to instruct and to refine the emotions along with the perceptions and the moral sense" (Fergus 3), proper to both the world of characters and that of readers. This sense of responsibility (and grief) over climate change prompts audiences to consider not only environmental futures but their own individual impact on both human and non-human life (Schneider-Mayerson). Effectively, the tree-centric novels deal with "challenges associated with climate change's often abstract nature" (Hawkins and Kanngieser). The attempt to elicit consensus against issues such as deforestation, air pollution or biodiversity loss builds

on the moral capital of sustainability beyond fiction. Reflecting on the political and moral implications of the power to change the shared understandings of the natural world is brought into play to advance the use value of communicative ethics (Habermas 1990). Communicating cultural (and political) values downplays the aesthetic dimension and potential of literature. Suggesting a shared understanding of moral goals among fictional characters is meant to nudge forward conversations on the culpability and consequences of the continuous growth paradigm in public policies, rather than pursuing notions of beauty in the field of creative expression. It does so by providing insight into impending ecological disasters, which reveal anxieties over a global post-fossil fuel future, at a time when the

> wish for a recognisable and knowable future looks futile, its ethics appear suspect, and its fears – that the end of human procreation is the end of the world – are rendered absurd. (Johns-Putra 167)

Against this backdrop, narrative inventiveness and interpretive complexities rework contemporary experiences of climate change into cautionary storytelling, with trees serving as an indicator of biodiversity health. As such, arboreal fiction (Cooke) aims to address the challenges of social transformation for climate resilience in relatable fictional moments. By investigating the strategies which fictional worldbuilding employed in the conceptualization of irreversible climate change, "literature can contribute to Anthropocene discourses: not only is literature traditionally seen as a form of imaginative world-building, […] literature can point to the limits of imagined worlds" (Vermeulen 72).

Tree-inspired prose attempts to redefine a world where trees act as a figurative stand-in for nature's resources, an imagined world whose limits are however plain to see. By emphasizing the moral imperative of combating climate change, literature is a means to an end. It functions as cautionary tales to increase awareness of the readers' own understanding of humankind's likely future on Earth. Consequently, sylvan plots come across as a vehicle for exploring literary environmentalism conveyed through extensive use of allegory and symbolism on and about impending ecological disaster. The collapse of the vegetal word is the symptom of a bigger, more complex humancentric anxiety over the future. In the (narrative) process, other factors that may influence climate are overlooked. The impact of human activities on the cohesive structures of a mutually reliant climatic network (the sun, the oceans, the glaciers, etc.) are essentially disregarded. Even though all these factors are conceivably variable and contributing to making the climate system unpredictable on their own, they are seldom mentioned. Climate

change is solely understood from a tree-centric perspective that necessarily entails human-made damage to the planet.

The individual moral choices of the characters, hidden in their personal narratives, are outweighed by sweeping statements about the natural world that evoke visions of ecological Armageddon. This is often perceived as a shortcoming of climate change fiction (Mehnert). Ultimately, the arboreal aesthetic invites readers to consider a post-human world where their own comfort and prominence are not priorities anymore, much like dystopian fiction on weather related apocalypse.

Exploring the Impact of the Anthropocene

Arboreal fiction can potentially challenge readers on issues of topical significance to their daily lives. Both novels explore agrowth in the context of public narratives on climate change with a focus on shared experiences of current climate breakdown. Literature has a stake in current debates around regulating carbon emissions. The diegetic worlds are supposed to elucidate the desirability of frugality, self-restraint, and respect for nature. Didactically, the didactic novels of the Anthropocene advocate reducing both production and consumption, at odds with mainstream cultures of growth-focused development. By investigating the discourse of shared values guiding the characters' actions and, consequently, their perceived agenda, the readers themselves are expected to engage with (the rhetoric of) climate transformation.

To this end, literary meaning-making procedures are shaped by discursive prompts that elaborate on virtue signalling. Both novels frame their plots as beneficial to the greater good of society. Characters and settings are used to represent the gap between growth-based development and the promise of moving beyond the logic of economic expansion. The sort of information readers glean from texts, called efferent knowledge (Rosenblatt), has historically been a hallmark of didactic novels. Advancing notions of ethical decision-making is meant to help restore confidence in sensible behaviours to slow down or possibly reverse global warming. Readers are exposed to literary nudges that should reveal some use-value since they impact the characters' choices. Characters and narrative voices find themselves caught between coarse generalizations on irreversible global warming versus reversible temperature increase (meant as transitory and/or cyclical). The plot curve is expected to reinforce scientific-based understanding of anthropogenic climate change in contrast to over-generalization on natural climate variability. However, the attempt to buttress technically correct beliefs is a matter of narrative intervention aimed at revealing the absurdity of the endless pursuit of economic growth. Influencing beliefs is the hoped-for result of fictional worldbuilding

strategies.

Inescapably, they refer to and create a sense of grief in conceptualizing climate breakdown. As "all literature involves some form of world-building (even that which aspires to social realism), the activity is most often associated with the creation of alternative realities" (Knepper 167), and arboreal tales are no exception. Such strategies are related to fictional self-perception thar conveys decision-making practices imbued with ethical choice for reader use. Efferent rather than aesthetic readings of climate change are accordingly fostered, mostly through instructional dialogue. Idealized characters and well-defined cause and effect narrative sequence are underpinned by allegory and symbol. The leafy lore is meant to play down the realization that cohabitating with, rather than exploiting, nature is often a hurdle.

The Overstory

As a "massively multi-protagonist novel" (Googasian), *The Overstory* makes the point that the dependency between human civilization and nature is disrupted by the pursuit of (economic) efficiency. The "state of the art instantiation of the arboreal sublime" (Schoene) offers commentary and guidance on the moral implications of economic growth through statements that read: "NO TO THE SUICIDE ECONOMY YES TO REAL GROWTH" (Powers 68.23%). It is this failure of local sustainability networks, which used to provide for both humankind and nature, that endangers the diegetic future. For instance, storytellers recount encounters with majestic, legendary trees: "Ta-ne Mahuta, Yggdrasil, Jian-Mu, the Tree of Good and Evil, the indestructible Asvattha with roots above and branches below. Then she's back at the original World Tree" (Powers 97.52%). Their branches are bigger than the Hoel Chestnut and represent no less than an Evolutionary Tree of Life.

> He has seen monster trees for weeks, but never one like this. […] The tree runs straight up like a chimney butte and neglects to stop. From underneath, it could be Yggdrasil, the World Tree, with its roots in the underworld and crown in the world above. Twenty-five feet above ground, a secondary trunk springs out of the expanse of flank, a branch bigger than the Hoel Chestnut. Two more trunks flare out higher up the main shaft. The whole ensemble looks like some exercise in cladistics, the Evolutionary Tree of Life—one great idea splintering into whole new family branches, high up in the run of long time. (Powers 50.17%)

The novel makes sense in the interplay between the omniscient narrative voice and the focus on nature. The representation of the physical world drives the plot forward and, every now and then, even replaces human characters as the focus of narrative eventfulness. The amount of change hinges on narrating tales that span generations. A literal interpretation of arboreal aesthetics elaborates on setting and characters that resemble the branching structure of a tree to evoke the natural world. Narrated in the present tense, the story of the Hoels family extends more than a century and challenges notions of diegetic time through a sense of overwhelming presentness, i.e., from mid-19th century onwards.

> *The Overstory* nurtures a renewed ecocritical perspective on different and interdisciplinary forms of knowledge by 'treeing' its narrative. Trees operate in the narrative as subjects that mediate between different spatial-temporal scales. (Meinen et al 42)

As exemplified by dendrological aesthetics, the strong bond with trees and the characters' fight against deforestation illustrate the idea that preserving the natural environment is essential for their well-being and society over the long term. The narrative representation of sylvan heroics and the dreadful effects of logging are meant to incite action. "By enacting well-articulated ideas, *The Overstory* runs the risk of being polemical, a presentation of ideology, but it edges into exploration to back away from such critique" (Nordberg 74). Edging into the exploration of societal shifts towards protecting forests should illustrate grappling with the challenge of mitigating both criticism and climate change. According to the authorial voice, everything boils down to the way you approach trees, even when felling them: "to solve the future, we must save the past. My simple rule of thumb, then, is this: when you cut down a tree, what you make from it should be at least as miraculous as what you cut down." (Powers 2018, 90.85%). The main threads in this narrative of sustainable development revolve around the notion of 'technology' that best describes human understanding of the forests' use value.

> We would be thrilled if you could talk about any role trees might play in helping mankind to a sustainable future. The conference organizers want a keynote from a woman who once wrote a book on the power of woody plants to restore the failing planet. But she wrote that book decades ago, when she was still young enough for courage and the planet still well enough to rally. These people need dreams of technological breakthrough. Some new way to pulp poplar into paper while burning slightly fewer hydrocarbons. Some genetically altered

> cash crop that will build better houses and lift the world's poor from misery. The home repair they want is just a slightly less wasteful demolition. She could tell them about a simple machine needing no fuel and little maintenance, one that steadily sequesters carbon, enriches the soil, cools the ground, scrubs the air, and scales easily to any size. A tech that copies itself and even drops food for free. A device so beautiful it's the stuff of poems. If forests were patentable, she'd get an ovation. (Powers 87.56%)

The above-mentioned explanation should capture what humans perceive to be the practical value derived from a forest and is revealing of the novel's focus. The consequences of climate variability results in attempts to absorb social shocks caused by dramatic change in weather patterns, without radically transitioning into a different economic logic, i.e., one underpinned by degrowth. Activities focused on supporting current societal strength in the face of climate change are equated to resilience. However, the ability to recover quickly from difficulties is blamed for preventing transformation (rather than 'resilience') from happening. This is how readers are nudged into thinking about individual and social transformation for climate resilience. Because of their experience, jobs or present responsibilities, most characters of *The Overstory* are very keen on promoting such cultural shifts. Their life stories emphasize well-being and quality of life over material wealth and consumption as deforestation is a tangible threat for most of them: "it looks like the shaved flank of a sick beast being readied for surgery. Everywhere, in all directions. If the view were televised, cutting would stop tomorrow" (Powers 16.75%). Advocating rights for nature is a means to acknowledge the inherent value that trees provide to humankind.

> Children, women, slaves, aboriginals, the ill, insane, and disabled: all changed, unthinkably, over the centuries, into persons by the law. So why shouldn't trees and eagles and rivers and living mountains be able to sue humans for theft and endless damages? (Powers 48.07%)

Crafting legal personas out of forested areas shifts the readers' perspective from an instrumental perspective on nature, in which trees are only seen through value to humans, to a moral and ethical one. Nature no longer remains a mere repository for resources to fuel human growth, but transforms into a fellow being, engaging in a symbiotic relationship with the audiences of tree focused narratives.

Fiction makes the point that, although nature has come to be increasingly valued, humans still bring damage to fauna and flora because the plot suggests it is still easy to believe that nature will endure despite our use

of fossil fuels burnt to generate both power and heat. It is this carbon dioxide of the diegetic world that has caused large-scale suffering, ever more visible for readers.

> "They can't win. They can't beat nature."
> "But they can mess things over for an incredibly long time."
> Yet on such a night as this, as the forest pumps out its million-part symphonies and the fat, blazing moon gets shredded in Mimas's branches, it's easy for even Nick to believe that green has a plan that will make the age of mammals seem like a minor detour. (Powers 56.94%)

Creating progress towards a more sustainable future requires building consensus through consistent messaging on the 'minor detour' of human history in the grand scheme of things. The characters are less likely to take costly action to bring about a sustainable future; instead, they suggest that such responsibility lies with someone else, not individuals. Fictional worldbuilding is used to emphasize the irreversible damage of climate change and introduce alternative development models (which may help the environment) but come across as inducing poverty. These key messages are ingrained in the plot. Relevant solutions pitched by characters – from employing energy-saving strategies to minimizing waste – further provide readers ways to reconcile with sustainability constraints. Personal lifestyle choices or buying local products aim to make sure readers internalize that individual contribution to the wellbeing of the planet is nevertheless considered significant.

Greenwood

By "adopting a technique of biomimicry, Greenwood is structured like the rings of a tree" (Manwaring), which is close-fitting the novel's theme and values. From the Great Depression to dramatic weather disruption in the immediate future (the 2038 of the opening chapters), *Greenwood* is the saga of another family, the Greenwoods. They have a history in the timber industry of British Columbia and move on, from environmental exploitation to (more) sustainable lifestyles. Wood is ever-present through statements meant to address the issue of forest use: "Most people believe that wood dies when it's cut," […] "But it doesn't. A wooden house is a living thing. Moving moisture through its capillaries. Breathing and twisting, expanding and contracting. Like a body" (Christie 65.39%).

However, from harvesting and processing trees into lumber, the Greenwoods are becoming carpenters or dendrologists in a world left almost without trees and teeming with climate refugees. After the ecological

devastation known in the diegetic world as the Great Withering, the surviving woods are cherished by those who can pay to enjoy "the beating heart of the Greenwood Arboreal Cathedral," […] [namely] "fifty-seven square kilometers of one of the last remaining old-growth forests on Earth" (Christie 2.25%). A dire need to embed eco-conscious values and actions into daily existence, while encouraging an appreciation for the great outdoors, is on display. Characters often confront dilemmas that should jolt likely audiences from complacency, prompting them to reflect on their actions and lifestyle choices.

The eco-parable of the intergenerational saga features characters that resemble trees themselves: "If the pair were trees, she'd be a tall, silvery birch, and Everett a crooked old oak" (Christie 2019, 85.56%). This is yet another reminder that the Arboreal Cathedral is essentially a reminder of the natural world now mostly lost due to catastrophic weather events such as:

> When the vortex approaches the church, she feels the air pressure drop and hears the glass explode inward above her, a million shards of shrapnel thrown across the library's dusty floor. When the roaring cone touches down on the library, she hears the roof removed with a tremendous screech of pulled nails and an almighty sucking whoosh. Then comes the uncanny sound that Temple Van Horne will surely never forget, not in all of her life: ten thousand books drawn up into the sky, all at once. (Christie 64.9%)

Less consumption and public support for relationships between humans and the environment that do without the unlimited growth promise are pushed to characters and readers through allegories and symbols of sustainability priorities. They stand in for the long-term benefit of humankind and forests alike. Accordingly, development should somehow not be driven by the economic and material utilization of nature and resources, while a physical connection to the environment and related historical memories are required to exist:

> She'll teach Liam to be strong, to live symbiotically with nature. He'll learn to be a warrior. A defender of the Earth. Together they'll consume as few resources as possible, and work toward repairing a tiny portion of the harm that Harris has inflicted upon the forests of the Earth. And someday, her son will thank her for it. (Christie 84.19%)

The mindset of characters changes over generations catalysed by a realization, unfortunately brought on by calamities: trees and, in time, wood

instil meaning and purpose. Such awareness indicates the shared destiny of humans and the environment, which suggests that there is no other way out of the predicament humankind finds itself in. By exploring the paradoxes and foibles of a growth-obsessed culture faced with impending doom, the plot should create spaces for reader introspection. The movement from exploitation to conservation is expected not to remain filled with turmoil and ambivalence, being both rationally and emotionally sound. However, the plot fails to articulate distinctly the confusion that commonly accompanies militant environmentalism as it implies that the shift away from relentless nature exploitation is taken for granted. Someone else – the next generation – is expected to bring about the desired harmony between humanity and the ecosphere:

> …why is it, she wonders casually as she stacks the boxes in her van, that we expect our children to be the ones to halt deforestation and species extinction and to rescue our planet tomorrow, when we are the ones overseeing its destruction today? (Christie 83.89%)

It is children and youth that think of trees as a time capsule, a history recorded in wood. Such built environments are maps that note momentous events, preserving them for years to come. This is why carpenters are likely to always have a job, as wood provides an incomparable sense of meaning and comfort that human-caused materials cannot: "WOOD IS TIME captured. A map. A cellular memory. A record. This is why, Liam believes, carpenters like himself will never go out of business. Because people will always keep wood close" (Christie 87.38).

The literary technique itself echoes the meticulous work of a carpenter: Greenwood creates identities whose storylines are built on symbols of growth and interconnectedness with a view to reinforcing the inherent and potential value of connecting humans with nature. The unfolding of the plot strives to deliver on the promise of creating a desirable vision of future human environments. The insistence on working with wood is one that compels constant adaptation to unexpected external forces.

> And while sloppiness is the most grievous insult you could throw at another carpenter, true perfection is maddeningly unattainable, which is why it's never spoken of. Because even after you cut a piece of wood and lay it straight, it lives on after you're finished, soaking up moisture, twisting, bowing, and warping into unintended forms. Our lives are no different. (Christie 85.07%)

Nature's propensity to warp and twist puts on display the complexity of all lifeforms, humans included. The side effect is that the discomfort of engaging with the long-term benefits of shifting from growth-based social models to concepts of sustainability as degrowth is often confusing. Such an alternative can be unappealing, casting long shadows of insecurity and lack of control, although toned down in the diegetic world of both novels. Such literary disquiet nudges readers toward considering likely societal decline and personal hardship, both entailed by reimagining the demise of civilization caused by (in)voluntary disentanglement from environmental exploitation. Consequently, narrative arguments for agrowth build metaphors bearing on notions of symbolic adaptability to imply readers should reevaluate their own understanding of nature and themselves, in the face of ecological catastrophe.

The sense of emergency brought about by weather disasters and their perception suggests that the self of those subjected to ethical failure to act and prevent similar events is constructed rather than a given. How ethically (ir)relevant is the sense of individual responsibility in fictional processes, and how moral meanings are narratively created and associated to the self of authors/characters/readers is intently conveyed by the diegetic world.

The Relevance of Tree-Inspired Prose

The Overstory and *Greenwood* dramatize the overarching theme of sustainability that features prominently notions of agrowth as the only way to tackle environmental issues. In the conceptualization of irreversible climate change, didactic novels aim to prove that the ecological enmeshment of both characters and readers points the way out: i.e., they should embark on a journey from what used to be unchecked exploitation of nature to what might result in sustainable cohabitation. The pain brought about by scrapping off exploitative approaches to flora and fauna is just a ripple effect through the diegetic worlds. Narrative voices imply that the trade-offs of growth-oriented lifestyles can be balanced by raising awareness of and articulating the benefits of sustainable living. Ultimately, they both convey univocal messages. Climate change sceptics, delayers, deniers, and fringe cultural groups are essentially overlooked. Characters navigate moral dilemmas related to climate change. Often, their life choices require a sacrifice of comfort to counter human-induced global warming. At every tiny step of their journey, there are huge complications that fail to reveal the complex trade-offs at play in the plot. By simplifying and highlighting cause-and-effect relationships among characters and settings, the diegetic worlds of both novels necessarily paint a moralizing picture of the conflicts and dilemmas of the (post)apocalypse. Each novel, in its own way, eludes most attempts at engaging with practical challenges raised by taking individual action to avert the prospect of disaster. The binary between pessimism and apocalypse does

not capture the complexity of climate perception. Their agenda overlooks more nuanced accounts of change always present in the lives of characters and readers alike. Both plots lapse into an environmental logic that deprives characters of the readers' belief in their agency, while elaborating on what looks like an extended metaphor of the circumstances their readers currently find themselves in.

Both novels render the denial of climate change invisible. This is a sense of denialism that literary discourses choose not to address for the sake of scientific consensus on human-caused global warming. Particularly audiences that feel environmental stories put forth unreasonable claims about impending doom are overlooked and only the readers well-aware of human made climate impacts have their climate change literacy (Hoydis et al. 2023) skills bolstered. As such, tree-inspired prose fails to address the challenges of social transformation for climate resilience in relatable fictional moments. This is particularly true for readers who resist the grief narrative over climate change. Ultimately, the wellbeing of characters (and readers) is approached through the framework of beliefs that do not meaningfully connect with anything beyond the logic of impending weather apocalypse. Explored within arboreal aesthetics, such plots require prior adherence to scientifically informed assessments of global warming and deforestation. The narrative bias is striking when it comes to literary narratives that promote anecdotal knowledge on shifting away from economic expansion.

Reader and author (desired) identity are central to the plot: their fictional representation is conducive to opening new ways of self-understanding at the time of the Anthropocene. The genre claims for itself aesthetic purpose, functioning as a technique for enforcing ethical considerations on observing and thinking about the natural world. While the authors' concerns may be legitimate, highlighting individual responsibility for climate change does not necessarily get across. Failing to acknowledge the complex reasons of readers who simply do not agree that climate change is factual (or, for that matter, that it is the result of human produced carbon emissions) is a major challenge for the newly re-minted tree aesthetic in narrative fiction. Narrative literature helps make sense of climate-related issues on a perceived local level, something often abstracted in large scale climate studies.

The significance of both novels aims for goals that are larger than aesthetic pursuits. While literary discourses per se are effective in framing sustainability within the logic of endeavours focused on aesthetics, they are ineffectual in reaching wider audiences, commonly more interested in their own living standards that collide with the agenda of a major push for action on climate change. The relevance of such narratives lies in linking a kind of individual flexibility, meant to achieve self-sufficiency despite less access to

resources, with the ethos of conserving the natural world.

Although literature should bring forward diverse cultural perspectives on climate change, propelling readers out of their usual context, both novels disregard what is commonly known as climate change denialism. Opposition to degrowth and, as a matter of principle, notions of sustainability are largely dismissed within the boundaries of the diegetic worlds. Only readers aware of climate change transformation are factored in by the diverse cast of characters to be found in the diegetic world. The agenda of both *The Overstory* and *Greenwood* builds on the consensus on human made global warming. They target the audience of climate change literature since their plots are unwilling or fail to address readers who choose not to experience grief over irreversible weather disruption now in progress. As such, both novels go against the grain of the didactic novel: they do not deliver on the promise of relatable fictional moments, meant to advance their own agenda to audiences that (tend to) believe in naturally occurring global warming. Consequently, the cautionary tale of didactic storytelling backfires as far as social transformation for climate resilience is concerned. The belief system at work in both novels does not connect with anything beyond the logic of impending weather apocalypse. Only explored within arboreal aesthetics, such instances of climate change literature require adherence to scientifically informed assessments of global warming and deforestation.

Climate change literature cannot sustain itself through intrinsic aesthetic worth as its agenda and, particularly, its moral overtones, take precedence. Explicitly, storytelling is supposed to prompt behavioural change, both on a collective and individual level, as narrative fiction embraces notions of ethical integrity, while looking back on the tradition of the didactic novel. Consequently, the genre's relevance is a matter of aesthetically engendered accountability for greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. This form of communication obscures the existence of various attitudes towards science, which differ notably. For instance, climate change deniers or fringe cultural groups who fail to draw mainstream attention act as if they can combat environmental threats with the help of either innovative or backward-looking cultural practices. Their insights remain untapped in most literary works on climate change. These diverse perspectives offer a variety of insights, some of which might prove critical in coping with climate change (not necessarily fighting it). Exploring these differences in relation to beliefs about climate change can provide emotional engagement and highlight on-ground issues rather than fretting about the reversal of extreme weather effects. Supposed to help delay or even revert global warming, the plot of environmental stories looks like an unsustainable political project. Its tools of expression advocate for environmental sustainability and are employed to destabilize the worldview of climate

change deniers. However, it is hard to tell what is real and what is fiction in tree-centric fiction, which, on account of being literature, is not to be rooted in fact and evidence. But this feels that is the very point of the genre. Namely, to use the scientific consensus to weaponize allegory and symbolism – make them a case in point of irony and ambiguity.

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