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“And All the Trees of the Field Shall Clap Their Hands”: Contextual Reflections on Powers, Thoreau and the Sacredness of Trees

Abstract: This essay uses an eco-theological lens to explore the relationship between Richard Powers’ novel *The Overstory* and various instances of Henry David Thoreau’s sometimes animistic characterizations of the natural world. It places Powers and Thoreau within an emerging conversation in the Religion and Ecology field. This conversation seeks to take animism more seriously as a form of religious expression and interpretation, despite a long history of Euro-American resistance to animism as a legitimate worldview. This essay interprets the current popularity of *The Overstory* within a broad historical context wherein the idea of the “personhood” of non-human beings—once largely rejected in the West—is slowly gaining traction in the realm of religious studies. In light of recent eco-theological writing that embraces animism, Henry David Thoreau was clearly prescient in representing the natural world as kin who are both animate and relational.

Keywords: Henry David Thoreau, Richard Powers, David Haberman, Mark Wallace, Victoria Loorz, animacy, personhood, Religion and Ecology, eco-theology, wild church

I chose for the title of this essay a passage from the Book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible, a passage in which the prophet describes the promise of staying in right covenantal relationship with the Divine. Isaiah is known for naming greed, individualism, materialism, and hubris as common players in humans’ failure to keep spiritual covenants; messages we hear clearly, also, in the work of both Richard Powers and Henry David Thoreau.

What will happen when deep spiritual covenants are valued and cultivated? Isaiah has an answer:

Before you, mount and hill shall shout aloud
 And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
 Instead of the brier, a cypress shall rise;
 Instead of the nettle, a myrtle shall rise.

(JPS Hebrew-English TANAKH, Isaiah 55:12)

Flipping the question, Powers, in essence, asks:

What will happen when deep spiritual covenants are destroyed?

The climate will collapse, the Great Trees will fall, authoritarianism will gain the upper hand, *but* the trees will have the last word. In *The Overstory*, that word, rich in biblical allusions, is “STILL.” This ancient message of spiritual persistence is matched by biological reality. Even when chopped down, the felled trees become the nurse logs for a vibrant community of life. The “still small voice” of unrealized potential remains.

What is notable in this passage from Isaiah is that we see an *ecological community* engaged in celebration and praise—the trees and mountains are animate subjects, actively companioning the humans. What we might call “ecological” views of human-nature relationships are, indeed, latent in the biblical sources, but *latent* is the operative word here. For a complex set of cultural and political reasons, these proto-ecological views were *not* the ones that influential Christians, and the institutions that they founded, chose to elevate.¹ Indeed, to the extent that the interwoven forces of Christianization and colonization have shaped North American culture, the notion of human exceptionalism remains a prominent aspect of that complex legacy. It is this very legacy that Powers seeks to overturn, observing in an interview in *Conjunctions* that “my goal, in *The Overstory*, was to treat trees as persons in their own dramatic narrative. . . . At the core of the book . . . is a rejection of human exceptionalism—the idea that we are the only things on earth with agency, purpose, memory . . . or community.”

While Thoreau spoke of trees as our relatives, it goes without saying that acknowledging the personhood of trees has *not* been the majority practice in Western culture. My hope in this brief essay is to instigate a conversation about how far we have come (and still have to go) from Thoreau’s prescient, but rare, understanding of trees as

subjects living in interdependent communities to Powers' celebrated work in which trees are championed as persons in their own right. By "persons," I mean that the trees are beings who are animate and who have subjectivity, even if they are often objectified by humans. They have means of communicating (through mycorrhizal networks), they respond to their surroundings, and they experience the difference between stressful and health-giving environments.

In many indigenous cultures (as well as in India, as discussed below), the concept of personhood functions as an umbrella category for a range of beings who are animate, who are the subjects of their own lives, and who are viewed by humans as kin: pine people, bear people, human people. This is a stance that differs starkly from that of the post-Enlightenment West, where only humans are given the status of persons and where feelings of kinship are culturally restricted to the human realm. Although writing from within a Western cultural framework, Powers clearly breaks with the Euro-American normative stance, casting trees as subjects who are often controlling the narrative. Ultimately, the trees ingrain themselves in our memories as both fallen heroes and a source (as compost) of ever-lasting life.²

In considering my initial claims about Powers' radicalism, however, I was led to identify some assumptions that were lurking behind my original vision for these reflections. My first assumption was that, to the extent that Thoreau spoke of trees as kin, he got in trouble for it. In reading through contemporary reviews of *Walden*, however, I found that the evidence did not quite bear this out. In his new intellectual biography of Thoreau, Lawrence Buell mentions a classic moment in "Chesuncook" where Thoreau imagines being met by a giant tree in the afterlife, a passage that Thoreau's editors sought to excise for being heretical. In his Journal, Thoreau fumed in response (112). Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* also received some push-back for its "pantheism" and his shocking (for its time) endorsement of non-Western religious traditions as being equal to—and sometimes surpassing—Christian ethics. Perhaps the reviewers of *Walden* did not know how potentially animistic Thoreau's sentiments truly *were* because most of what we hear about tree-kinship appears in the then-unpublished Journal. Nevertheless, having reviewed the evidence, I now see *less* of a gap between the reception of Thoreau's work and the reception of Powers' work than I had originally presumed.

Yet regarding Powers I was also somewhat presumptuous, in an entirely different direction. For just who is this *we* that applauds Powers' book so enthusiastically? Is it not mostly a *we* that would lobby *for* the personhood of Happy the elephant (currently unable to leave the Bronx Zoo) and *against* the personhood of unregulated corporations?³

There are, by contrast, significant voices in the U.S. and abroad who claim that *The Overstory* is culturally and theologically dangerous. Here is one example from a book review that appeared in what I would call a mainline-Protestant evangelical online journal. Asking herself why *The Overstory* has such widespread appeal, Sarah Allen had this to say:

Like today's veganism and identity politics, it offers something which looks like immediate virtue but is an ultimate dead-end. Nature can lower the blood pressure, but it can't teach us right from wrong. Whilst pantheism might look noble, it comes close to nihilism; human life matters little from the perspective of a tree.⁴

This is from a generally favorable review.

So, yes, we in the West have come a long way in our ability to embrace animism, but that depends, of course, on the *we* to which one refers. For this reason, I think there is much to be learned from taking a meta-view with regard to the success of Powers' book. I want to evoke that meta-view from my perspective as a student of religion. In tracking various recent texts in the Religion and Ecology field, I see a contemporary interest and openness to animism that is relatively new, dynamic and growing. Let me offer a taste of one such text, David Haberman's *People Trees: Tree Worship in Northern India*.

In *People Trees*, Haberman reminds his readers that serious consideration of tree worship was central to many scholarly theories of religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and "yet today," he observes, "sacred trees and tree worship have practically disappeared from the academic terrain of religious theory" (3).

What led to the disappearance of tree worship as a subject worthy of consideration? The fault, Haberman argues, lies with the founding scholars of the field who "shared a developmental view of

history that regarded such practices as tree worship as involving a primitive and ultimately mistaken stage of thought in which nonhuman life was viewed as being sentient, an idea that had to be expunged from modern thought" (3). Haberman goes on to explain that the field of religious studies, in its emergence, was heavily influenced by the work of anthropologists Edward Tylor, W. Robertson Smith, and James Frazer. "[They] all agree that religion evolved from the personification of nature and that tree worship was clear evidence of this," Haberman notes, but they all also agreed that tree worship stood merely at the inception of religion's upward development toward a more civilized form (exemplified by Christian monotheism) (3). Recognizing trees as persons—or as gods—was an ancient phenomenon to be nodded to and then surpassed.

We can add to this story of late nineteenth-century theorizing about religion. The development of the Western scientific method as an objective practice that provides us with the only real data worth having about the natural world. Within such a context, the appearance of even a hint of anthropomorphism regarding plants and animals could be the cause of a scientist's professional demise. Such was the case for the character of Patricia Westerford in *The Overstory*, as it also was—in real life—for Rachel Carson when the government-funded pesticide industry fought tooth-and-nail to discredit her.⁵

In short, considering trees as persons has long been *verboten* within the broad contours of Western thought. This is true for one set of reasons when Western thought was (or still is) dominated by Christianity (here, the key words are "idolatry," "pantheism," and "paganism") and for another set of reasons in post-Enlightenment, rational, secularized spaces (here, the key words are "anthropomorphic," "childish," and "sentimental"). In the latter context, it is worth noting that such terms are often applied, in a highly gendered way, to describe and dismiss the work of women scientists.

Haberman works as an ethnographer in Northern India, interviewing everyday people who worship trees as the abodes of gods or, often, as manifestations of the gods themselves. Some of these worshippers are more traditional Hindu practitioners, others have received Western educations and work in more secular settings. *None* dispute the personhood of trees. Although some trees have more spiritual valence than others, many of Haberman's interviewees reported that

performing *seva* (service) to a particularly charismatic tree often led them to see *all* trees and, indeed, *all life*, as physical manifestations of divinity.

Of what does *seva* consist? This depends on the tree, the occasion, and the person who is offering devotional service. Often it involves placing a bowl of water and some traditional sweets at the foot of a sacred tree (the same customary offerings that are brought to various gods, both at temples and home altars). Other rituals focus on circumambulating a tree while wrapping it in sacred thread. In other cases, colored powder is used to draw eyes on a tree, helping to evoke the ritual practice of seeing and being seen that is known as *darshan*.

On the level of description—identifying those trees that are particularly sacred, describing how daily and monthly rituals are performed, asking tree-worshippers about the meaning of their practices—Haberman is doing straightforward anthropological reporting, but in the final chapter of his book, “Arboreal Reflections,” he makes his broader intentions clear. His larger purpose is to ask: “What might life be like if we took the ‘personhood’ of trees and other life forms seriously?” (199). He goes on to pose pointed questions to his Western readers: “The silencing of trees . . . shaped by post-Renaissance science and colonial scholarship has led to highly unfavorable results. . . . Would awareness of the personhood of trees allow us to realize that we are not as alone as we thought?” (202).

While Haberman’s work is in India, his primary goal is to provoke *Western* readers into understanding that viewing nature as an “it” is but one cultural perspective among many. This is an argument that Robin Wall Kimmerer makes in a different, but equally compelling way in the “Planting Sweetgrass” section of *Braiding Sweetgrass*:

Imagine seeing your grandmother standing at the stove in her apron and then saying of her, ‘Look, it is making soup. It has gray hair.’ . . . That would be a profound act of disrespect. *It* robs a person of selfhood and kinship. (55)

Describing her own Potawatomi perspective and that of “most other indigenous” people, Kimmerer explains (because it seems to *need* explaining): “[We] use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family” (55). Powers and

Thoreau would agree. Moreover, the enormous popularity of Kimmerer's work—no doubt helped by her scientific *bona fides*—demonstrates the emergent cultural hunger for a view of nature as animate subject. That same hunger drove the positive response (in some circles) to *The Overstory*. Something is shifting.

Alongside these sojourns into non-Western worldviews have come recent articulations of nature's personhood from within more recognizably Euro-American perspectives. Two examples I will briefly note are from liberal Christian contexts: Mark Wallace's theological study, *When God was a Bird* and Victoria Loorz's evangelical memoir, *The Church of the Wild*.

In his ambitious theological venture, *When God was a Bird*, Mark Wallace builds on the familiar (to Christians) words of Apostle Paul (as well as *Acts* 17:27-28) to ask an old theological question in a new way:

Are not sun, water, earth and air the animating elements within which we all live and move even as our very being is daily sustained by their providential gifts? . . . God is the pulsing, driving life force within the wide expanse of the green world that brings all things together for their, and our, common sustenance. (69).

Wallace walks his readers through moment after moment in the Christian Old and New Testaments where God is portrayed as speaking not simply *through* nature, but *as* nature.

At the same time, Wallace reminds his readers of the distinctions between Christian theologies that are found in the scriptures and the theologies that have emerged within Christian *history*, where various Western cultural lenses of dualism (from Hellenism to the Enlightenment) have

falsely separate[ed] what biblical religion carefully blends and mixes together. . . [where] the natural world, and its many divine, human and animal denizens, is the primary locale of the biblical God's revelation of peace and fecundity. *Above all else, nature is God's preferred habitat in the Bible.* (73).

In making this claim, however, Wallace recognizes that he has walked

well out on the limb of normative Christian theology. “This animist vision of God and nature,” Wallace admits, “is a bridge too far for many religious thinkers who seek to isolate God from the Earth” (69).

While Wallace’s book has made its mark by adventurously pushing the boundaries of Christian eco-theology, Loorz’s work, *The Church of the Wild*, has spurred a new and growing church-in-the-woods movement. In these emergent liturgical contexts, praise for the Kingdom of God has shifted linguistically to praise for the “Kin-dom of God,” a vulnerable world of reciprocal relationships that needs our celebration and care. In her work, Loorz is careful not to make the hasty leap from “pantheism to nihilism” that Allen (the Christian reviewer of *The Overstory* quoted above) unwisely suggests is an inevitable trajectory if trees start to be taken seriously. Digging deep into the history of her own tradition, Loorz attends to the opening words of the Gospel of John—“In the beginning was the Word (*Logos*) and the word was with God and the Word was God”—and unearths the original meaning of *Logos* as “conversation,” a sacred dialogue that the natural world invites us into if we are willing to listen (105-121). While representing a (growing) minority tradition, Loorz is certainly not alone in advocating a Christian vision in which nature is understood to be kin and where birds, deer, and trees are considered to be persons with full subjectivity.

Tracking the broad enthusiasm for *The Overstory* and reading it within the wider context of emerging scholarship in the study of religion gives me hope. It gives me hope that recognizing the personhood of trees is no longer an aberration in the West, even if it may not yet be the dominant view. As is so often the case, Thoreau was prescient in articulating a perspective that, thanks to Powers and others, is now being more widely received. Let me conclude with Thoreau’s words:

The trees indeed have hearts. With a certain affection the sun seems to send its farewell ray far and level over the copses to them & they silently receive it with gratitude. . . . The pines impress me as human. . . .

Nothing stands up more free from blame in this world than a pine tree. (December 20, 1851; 4: 212)

Notes

¹ There is an extensive literature here. One recent addition (noted later in this essay) is Mark Wallace, *When God Was a Bird*.

² As Thoreau famously put it: “Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?” (*Walden* 138).

³ I imagine that the concept of corporate personhood—as it is now enshrined in judicial rulings—would have appalled, but not surprised, Thoreau. See, for instance, the decisions *Citizens United* (2010) and *Hobby Lobby* (2014).

⁴ It is worth noting that the Book of Job offers a countervailing view about nature’s role in moral education: “But ask the animals and they will teach you; / or speak to the land, and it will inform you” (Job 12:7).

⁵ See Michael Smith, “‘Silence! Miss Carson!’”

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