



# Becoming Indigenous Again

## The Native Informant and Settler Logic in Richard Powers's *Overstory*

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**Abstract** The figure of the “native informant,” as outlined by Spivak, confers a legitimacy of “inside” information for the colonial subject that, ultimately, is generalized to the point of confirming the colonist’s view of the world, challenging nothing and, instead, providing authenticity to existing beliefs. Since Indigenous groups are often associated with primordial nature in the hemispherically American context, there is a long tradition of settler colonial societies appropriating the figure of the Native to claim authentic land rights or establish an identity distinct from Europe. This article argues that, in its modern iteration, appropriation of the native informant within the natural context serves anxieties concerning potentially illegitimate land stewardship for settler colonial societies. Focusing on the native informant figure in Richard Powers’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Overstory*, the article explicates how, in the age of climate change, patterns around settler land theft are repeated and repurposed for the settler episteme in which, instead of reconsidering who has the rights to land stewardship, the settler seeks to transfer Indigenous knowledge to themselves, authenticating the settler society’s continued right to the colonized land. While Powers makes significant contributions to reconsidering the European model of an anthropocentric relation to nature, the article argues that *The Overstory* does this through repeating such settler colonial traditions as associating Indigenous peoples solely with the past and depicting the American landscape in a way that relies on the legal mythology of terra nullius.

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In her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Gayatri Spivak critiques the literary trope of the “native informant” who, according to Spivak, is “generalized . . . [and who mouths] for us the answers that we want to hear as confirmation of our view of the world.”<sup>1</sup> The confirmed worldview operates on assumptions about the native informant as “[conferring] a legitimacy and verisimilitude on the narrative as a privileged source of ‘inside’ information, smuggled out past the language

1. Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 342.

barrier.”<sup>2</sup> Literary applications of the native informant are myriad, but perhaps none are so familiar as the native informant in the natural setting. Often associated with primordial nature in the hemispherically American context,<sup>3</sup> settler colonial evocations of the native informant as “one with nature” in fiction have served such purposes as claiming authentic land rights or establishing a New World identity separate from European ancestors, as with, for example, “The Vision of Karistagia, a Sachem of Cayuga” by Lewis Henry Morgan in the United States or *Macunaíma* by Mário de Andrade in Brazil.<sup>4</sup> However, in the age of climate change, the native informant steps into a new role for the settler colonist author who is anxious about the reality of their flawed land stewardship and its consequences.

This most recent iteration of the native informant in the age of climate change is demonstrated in Richard Powers’s 2018 novel *The Overstory*. Since its publication, *The Overstory* has garnered a significant amount of attention as a long, skilled novel dealing with the topic of the environment. It won the Pulitzer Prize and the William Dean Howells Medal, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and has been listed on a number of best book lists for 2018 by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Newsweek*, NPR, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *Time*, and Amazon. In the brief period since its publication, a number of scholars have published on the novel, including Jonathan Arak, who considers *The Overstory* as following the American tradition of attempting the “Great American Novel.”<sup>5</sup> Although *The Overstory* has faced some mild criticism for being overdramatic and didactic,<sup>6</sup> Powers’s novel clearly holds an important position in the anxious imagination of contemporary environmentally inclined readers.

The story follows nine primary characters through their different struggles with anthropocentric modes of existence, including everything from environmental activism in Oregon’s Timber Wars of the 1990s to botanical research on plant sentience to designing video games in which players have access to a mythic world of endless resources. Most of the characters’ stories intersect at some point in the novel, although not all do. Of these nine characters, they seem to be either white or Asian, and *The Overstory* has previously been criticized for being “poisoned by an uninspired lack of racial representation.”<sup>7</sup> Given that an underlying message of the novel is that its settler characters need

2. Cronin, “Empire Talks Back,” 54.

3. See Denevan, “Pristine Myth”; Hendlin. “From *Terra Nullius* to *Terra Communis*.”

4. “The Vision of Karistagia, a Sachem of Cayuga” is the story of a spirit guide showing Karistagia the way in which the land that became New York was colonized. Despite Karistagia’s rage, he is warned that his vow of vengeance “availith nothing and [that he] must be content” (qtd. in Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 80). Philip Deloria uses this story as an example of the trope of the “vanishing Indian” and the naturalization of Native displacement. *Macunaíma* by Mário de Andrade makes use of the Indigenous creator god by the same name to create a uniquely Brazilian literary *modernismo* that was distinct from Portuguese culture. In the end Macunaíma kills his Native village, making him the last Indian (for more on the native informant in *Macunaíma*, see Shemak, “Alter/natives”).

5. Arak, “*Overstory*: Taking the Measure,” 139.

6. See Markovits, “*Overstory* by Richard Powers”; Jordison, “How Could *The Overstory*.”

7. Arcoite, “More Diversity in Its Trees.”

to “become natives,”<sup>8</sup> the absence of any major Indigenous character is particularly striking. In a 502-page novel that covers nine characters’ lives from childhood to middle age, old age, or death, the novel features only four nameless Indigenous characters (appearing on pages 486, 492, 493, 501, and 502), who mainly function to affirm one of the nine protagonists’ environmental epiphanies, arrived at over the course of hundreds of pages of character development.

Thus *The Overstory*, while attempting to create a great American novel about environmental exploitation and beyond, fundamentally operates on settler colonial assumptions about land and nature that are anything but new in the American canon. Across its four sections titled “Roots,” “Trunk,” “Crown,” and “Seeds,” Powers’s novel is structured to remind the reader of the life cycle of plant beings. However, this cyclical structure also works well for scaffolding a discussion of settler colonialism’s own recycled thinking in which old reasoning is applied to contemporary issues time and again. Thus this article will follow Powers’s structure of renewal to problematize the repeating settler reasoning that the novel follows, beginning with Indigenous erasure, moving on to settler anxieties over true belonging, and eventually resolving these anxieties through the authenticating approval of the native informant.

### Roots

Just as *The Overstory*’s “Roots” relate the origins of the human actors who propel the narrative through several decades of story, the foundations of settler colonial environmental thinking have their own deep, interlocking root systems, which have grown into the United States’ colonial traditions. When Europe was first colonizing the Americas, they did so with what is known as the “discovery doctrine,” an international legal framework that gave property rights over land to any European who first “discovered” it, without the knowledge or consent of Indigenous peoples.<sup>9</sup> These laws were concerned primarily with claiming land against other European nations in the Americas rather than arguing discoverers’ property rights over those of Indigenous communities.<sup>10</sup> While there were several Eurocentric value systems that excluded Indigenous communities from consideration in the discovery doctrine, like Christianity, the concept of terra nullius was central for England particularly, and this principle is still at work in settler colonial approaches to the environment today.<sup>11</sup> Terra nullius, at its most basic, means land that is declared vacant and therefore available to the first settler who finds it.<sup>12</sup> However, vacancy in the colonial Americas went beyond inhabitation (scholars estimate that there were between 40 and 100 million Indigenous people living in the Americas prior to

8. Powers, *Overstory*, 288.

9. Miller et al., *Discovering Indigenous Lands*, 3.

10. Miller et al., *Discovering Indigenous Lands*, 9.

11. See Hendlin, “From *Terra Nullius* to *Terra Communis*.”

12. Hendlin, “From *Terra Nullius* to *Terra Communis*,” 141.

1492),<sup>13</sup> as it also included “lands that were not being used in a fashion that European legal systems understood and/or approved . . . [i.e., not] used according to European laws and cultures.”<sup>14</sup> Bolstered by papal bulls, Spain and Portugal justified their land rights primarily through the Christian mission, while Protestant England and Holland drew on English scholars, from Alberico Gentili and Grotius through John Locke, to claim that land possession required cultivation and, specifically, extraction beyond subsistence in order to be legitimate.<sup>15</sup>

What may have started as a willful ignorance of Indigenous presence in the Americas over time grew into a full-blown ideology that Philip Deloria has called the “vanishing Indian.”<sup>16</sup> Starting with government-forced relocation in the early nineteenth century, ever-expanding US settlements relegated conceptions of Indigenous peoples to the past. During the nineteenth century, the rhetoric shifted from Indigenous communities’ ceding of their land rights to European colonizers owing to insufficient or inappropriate use, to Indigenous people themselves completely disappearing from the land. Gentili claimed that “the seizure of vacant places is regarded as a law of nature . . . because of that law of nature which abhors a vacuum, they will fall to the lot of those who take them;”<sup>17</sup> by 1828 this became what Supreme Court justice Joseph Story claimed was “a law of nature . . . [where Indigenous Americans] seem destined to a slow, but sure extinction. Everywhere, at the approach of the white man, they fade away.”<sup>18</sup>

It is this point in time that the reader begins their journey through *The Overstory*, around the declaration of Iowa’s statehood in 1846. After a short, reflective passage about a woman sitting underneath a tree, *The Overstory* begins (and will end) with the story of Nicholas Hoel, an artist from a family of Iowan farmers. Nick’s “Roots” chapter begins with his great-great-great grandfather, Jørgen Hoel, a Norwegian immigrant to the United States. For Jørgen, his new country is “the fabled free banquet of America—yet one more windfall in a country that takes even its scraps right from God’s table.”<sup>19</sup> “Citizenship,” for Jørgen Hoel, “comes with a hunger for the uncut world.”<sup>20</sup> Jørgen, who sees his new country as a “free banquet” for Europeans to take from God, not only reads America through a classic terra nullius lens, but he also engages in what William M. Denevan has called the pristine myth, in which the American landscape is seen as “pristine, virgin, a wilderness, nearly empty of people.”<sup>21</sup> This myth misreads the Americas’ abundance relative to the European landscape, after millennia of intensive exploitation,

13. Denevan, “Pristine Myth,” 370.

14. Miller et al., *Discovering Indigenous Lands*, 9.

15. Hendlin, “From *Terra Nullius* to *Terra Communis*,” 145, 147.

16. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 64.

17. Gentili, *De Jure Belli*, quoted in Tuck, *Rights of War and Peace*, 48.

18. Story, “Discourse, Pronounced at the Request of the Essex Historical Society,” quoted in Dippie, *Vanishing American*, 1.

19. Powers, *Overstory*, 5.

20. Powers, *Overstory*, 6.

21. Denevan, “Pristine Myth,” 369.

as an absence of *people*, rather than recognizing what actually produced the abundance: numerous, yet intentional, Indigenous interventions in the natural environment. However, for Jørgen, his new world is “uncut” because the land has had nobody farm it before. On moving with his new wife to the new state of Iowa, land that is traditionally the territory of the Iowa or Sauk and Meskwaki people,<sup>22</sup> “the authorities give away land platted yesterday to anyone who will farm it.”<sup>23</sup> On this land, “[Jørgen’s] mind is already making bread, coffee, soups, cakes, gravies—all the delicacies that the natives knew this tree could give. ‘We can sell the extra, in town.’”<sup>24</sup> Here, while Jørgen’s story is related in the present tense, the “Natives” are already relegated to the past tense. Indigenous peoples—a source of inside knowledge—were aware their land was capable of great gifts, but, by the laws of nature, they did not produce a surplus beyond subsistence, and so they have been replaced by someone who will, someone who will “farm it,” someone who will create “extra.”

Thus *The Overstory* opens with the story of the ideal American settler colonist. While the views of a character such as Jørgen are to be expected from a Norwegian immigrant in the mid-nineteenth century, the way he is presented is unsettlingly uncritical. The sentimental trope of a founding family patriarch who plants chestnut trees so that “[his] children will shake the trunks and eat for free”<sup>25</sup> encourages the reader to understand his actions and motivations in an overwhelmingly sympathetic light. Further, Jørgen, despite being invested in creating a surplus, is the only Hoel who is depicted without any relationship to industrial farming machinery. Beginning with the first generation after Jørgen, John Hoel, his son, sees “the farm [prosper]. . . . With his father gone and his brothers off on their own, John Hoel is free to chase after the latest machines.”<sup>26</sup> This approach eventually leads to the farm’s ruination when, several generations after John, the farm “is long-term leased to outfits run from offices hundreds of miles away. The Iowa earth has been brought to its rationalized end.”<sup>27</sup> The sympathetic tone of Jørgen’s story implies that his approach was somehow “right” and that the Midwest was “brought to its rationalized end” by extraneous financial and industrial forces that ruined the otherwise idyllic Hoel settlement. This tone misses the fact that these forces spring from the same imaginary of surplus value that Jørgen himself held in order to justify his occupation of the land, and which his descendants repeated by mediating their relationship to the land through exploitative, distant machinery.

This increasingly distant relationship to the farm over the generations is echoed and embodied in the family’s relationship to the chestnut tree that Jørgen plants on settlement, and which grows to dominate the surrounding Iowan landscape. Jørgen comes

22. “Native Land.”

23. Powers, *Overstory*, 6.

24. Powers, *Overstory*, 8.

25. Powers, *Overstory*, 6.

26. Powers, *Overstory*, 10.

27. Powers, *Overstory*, 21.

to America during “the time of chestnuts,” understanding that “if you would learn the secrets of Nature, you must practice more humanity,”<sup>28</sup> and so he plants a chestnut grove to feed his children. However, instead of cultivating the secrets of nature and practicing more humanity, future Hoel generations extend their machinal relationship with the land to their father’s chestnut tree. John Hoel buys a camera and sets to a “grand plan . . . as if he invented it. He decides, for whatever years are left to him, to capture the tree and see what the thing looks like, sped up to the rate of human desire”<sup>29</sup> by taking one picture of the tree on the same day every month. His son, Frank, picks up the practice, and Frank makes his son promise to continue after him. What results are 915 photographs of the tree spanning three quarters of a century, removed from the Hoel family’s human story, which happens “outside [the] photos’ frame.”<sup>30</sup>

While Jørgen may have set out to learn the secrets of nature in America’s undisturbed, “vacant” land, his children warp the pursuit into a grand plan that caters to anthropocentric desire for speed and control. Susan Sontag writes, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power,”<sup>31</sup> adding that photography’s drive to capture as many subjects as possible is distinctly more imperial than painting.<sup>32</sup> Thus the human subject comes to enact an anthropocentric role within nature, and it is this distanced relationship that is one of the main subjects of critique for *The Overstory*. Beginning with the Hoels and their photography, human characters throughout the novel, including but not limited to loggers, lawyers, and video game designers, “invent” schemes to better understand and exert power over plants precisely by placing distance between the human and the plant, by excluding the human story from its object of study. The imperial drive for understanding, power, and capture with the photograph and machine becomes the settlers’ means of engaging with the land, and this is what eventually leads the land to its “rationalized end.”

However, what Powers misses in this critique is that Jørgen can only seek a new human-vegetal relationship with nature in the first place by erasing what was there before him: the human-vegetal relationship between Indigenous peoples and his land. Jørgen’s idyllic foundations would be fundamentally challenged by the inclusion of any non-settler human presence, even as they carry the knowledge he seeks. Jørgen’s taking land “given” to him by the US government is itself a violent, colonial act against Indigenous people;<sup>33</sup> therefore, to preserve Jørgen’s idealist foundations, Powers removes any Indigenous presence from the majority of the novel and effectively creates a narrative terra nullius within *The Overstory*.

28. Powers, *Overstory*, 5.

29. Powers, *Overstory*, 11.

30. Powers, *Overstory*, 16.

31. Sontag, “On Photography,” 174.

32. Sontag, “On Photography,” 176.

33. See Fanon, “On Violence,” 4–5.

This act of removal allows *The Overstory* to progress from an idyllic foundation narrative, which seeks a human-nature reciprocal understanding, to its modern ruination by machinal forces that are distanced from and unsympathetic to the land. Thus this industrially instigated decline encourages the reader to seek environmental redemption, a return to what once was, and this notionally corrective nostalgia largely sets the tone for the rest of the novel. However, by operating on a desire to return to what is, fundamentally, a violent period of US colonialism and Powers's navigation of that violence through narrative terra nullius, *The Overstory's* philosophical environmental theses become limited to what already exists within the settler colonial imagination.

### Trunk and Crown

Having established this narrative structure of pristine, abundant land, whose productivity was appreciated by the first Europeans who settled on it, then was ruined by modern extractive practices, *The Overstory* grows from the rooted family tragedy to an expanding global crisis, generally encompassing themes of environmental loss and destruction. This theme transpires across the "Trunk" and "Crown" sections but is predominantly acted out in what is today known as the American Pacific Northwest from the California Redwoods to Cascadia, Oregon, and which is traditionally the territories of Tolowa Deeni' and the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.<sup>34</sup> It is here that Nicholals Hoel, Olivia Vandergriff, Mimi Ma, Douglas Pavlicek, and Adam Apich work together as environmental activists in the Timber Wars of the 1990s, a real period of American environmental history during which activists, scientists, and legal teams attempted to halt the logging of old-growth forests in Oregon.<sup>35</sup> A sixth character, Patricia Westerford, is nearby conducting related research on old-growth forests at Oregon State University.

While there are no Indigenous characters in these two sections making up the bulk of the novel, there are several explicit evocations of Indigeneity, which, while brief, lexically crystalize the general longing for a "before" that was established in the environment of "Roots." Once, while living in the treetops of a giant redwood to prevent loggers from cutting it down, the character Olivia Vandergriff—a presumably white, college-age woman and love interest for Nick Hoel—tells loggers who have come to cut the trees down, "We have to learn to love this place. We need to become natives."<sup>36</sup> This sentiment is echoed a second time shortly after while the pair are joined by a larger resistance effort (on the ground this time), including Mimi, Douglas, and Adam. Speaking to another group of loggers whom the protestors are trying to block with their bodies, she tells them, "We need to stop being visitors here. We need to live where we live, to become indigenous again."<sup>37</sup>

34. "Native Land."

35. NPR, *Timber Wars*.

36. Powers, *Overstory*, 288.

37. Powers, *Overstory*, 339.

The core sentiment here is something for which Powers has been praised throughout reviews of *The Overstory*: people must be appreciative and thoughtful of their relationship with natural resources. Shortly before calling to become Indigenous again, Olivia explains, “If people knew what went into making trees, they would be so, so thankful for the sacrifice. And thankful people don’t need as much,”<sup>38</sup> and this mindset is certainly a valuable core theme to take away from the novel. “Native” or “indigenous” here could be understood in the way these terms are used to describe, say, native plants that have evolved for centuries with their neighbors to create a delicately reciprocal ecosystem, as distinguished from the dominating force of invasive plants. This would align with the novel’s assertion that humanity has much to learn from plant ontology—one of Nick’s final revelations is that “it amazes [him] how much [plants] say, when you let them. They’re not that hard to hear.”<sup>39</sup>

While it is valuable to stress the relations between humans and plants, operating on the logic of terra nullius and atemporal, a progressive assumptions about what it means to be Native as *people* on colonized land, the argument for “becom[ing] indigenous again” falls into settler colonial logic. Particularly through using the word *again* in the second instance, these calls to action define Indigeneity as a relation of time rather than ethnic or geographic origin. Just as the Hoel farm was an Eden before industrialization, so too can these forests remain an Eden if they are kept in a time of *before*. By using the terms *Native* and *Indigenous* as shorthand for this temporal yearning, Powers engages in the common trope of associating Indigeneity with an ahistorical naturalness that is in contradistinction to Europe’s temporality, history, and technology,<sup>40</sup> creating what Kyle Whyte has called “vicious sedimentation.”<sup>41</sup> Whyte argues that “sedimentation renders settler populations unwilling to accept Indigenous peoples as adaptive people with long *and* continuing histories in North America.”<sup>42</sup> As Whyte describes in detail for the Anishinaabe people and Denevan describes broadly for Amerindians, these long histories did include substantive, if not traditionally European, interference with the land. According to Yogi Hale Hendlin, “Conservationists whom [sic] mistakenly ascribe to the mutually exclusive human-nature dualism and attempt to conserve land free of human intervention actually uphold a romantic notion of a moment in ecological time.”<sup>43</sup> Powers, to his credit, does not advocate for a pure cleavage between humans and nature, arguing in several places that trees are the ancestors of humanity and that people must treat them as such. Olivia, for example, argues, “We’re not saying don’t cut anything. . . . We’re saying, cut like it’s a gift, not like you’ve earned it. Nobody likes to take more gift than they need,”<sup>44</sup> an approach that seems aware of the

38. Powers, *Overstory*, 339.

39. Powers, *Overstory*, 493.

40. DeLoughery, “Quantum Landscapes,” 73.

41. Whyte, “Settler Colonialism.”

42. Whyte, “Settler Colonialism,” 138.

43. Hendlin, “From *Terra Nullius* to *Terra Communis*,” 155.

44. Powers, *Overstory*, 289.



aforementioned critiques of settler colonial environmentalism. However, settler colonists can no more become indigenous to the land on which they are settled than they can become the plants that live on it, even if both have valuable knowledge from which they can and should learn. Potawatomi botanist and scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer<sup>45</sup> argues that no amount of settler time or caring can substitute for the birthright of Indigeneity, for its “soul-deep fusion with the land.”<sup>46</sup> Rather, she suggests that settlers might strive to become naturalized to place, the vocabulary here connoting an understanding of one’s present reliance on the land, one’s ancestors’ past relationship with the land, and one’s children’s future need to relate to the land.<sup>47</sup>

Indigenous is part of a vocabulary of belonging, according to Kimmerer, and, by Powers evoking this term instead of Kimmerer’s naturalization, he engages in one of the most basic goals of settler colonialism: mass transfer. When settler societies claim to have achieved Indigeneity, they engage in what Lorenzo Veracini has described as one of several types of “narrative transfer,” in which Indigenous groups have no more claim to the land than the settlers, because all now sufficiently belong.<sup>48</sup> Despite the doctrine of discovery’s demonstrating Europeans’ disinterest in whether or not they had the legal right to claim the Americas over Amerindians, there are several instances in which early settler Americans made intentional efforts to demonstrate their belonging to the New World—often through cultural appropriation—that speak to a deep settler colonial anxiety that operates beyond European law. Philip Deloria’s book *Playing Indian* enumerates the myriad manifestations that Indigenous appropriation has taken in US history, from the colonial period through the twentieth century. In his examination of early America, these instances of appropriation are often tied to wanting to belong to the land.<sup>49</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg draws on Deloria, Sigmund Freud, and legal definitions of surrogacy to explain the Tamany Society’s tradition of dressing up like Indigenous Americans during the late eighteenth century. According to Smith-Rosenberg, this tradition came from “need[ing] cultural instruments through which to ameliorate and articulate the radical . . . transformation that had marked their lives and the birth of the new republic; their loss of a centuries-old British identity; . . . their fears of being

45. Powers and Kimmerer, as contemporaries, personally know each other and share a warm acquaintanceship. In a *New York Times* article, while discussing his research process for *The Overstory*, Powers stated that he “give[s] daily thanks for Robin Wall Kimmerer for being a font of endless knowledge, both mental and spiritual.” It is interesting, then, that the character Patricia Westerford, the botanical researcher, was based on the influential settler Canadian researcher Suzanne Simard, despite the potential a Kimmerer character might have had in disrupting some of the settler colonial themes running through *The Overstory*. Powers, “By the Book”; Schiffman, “‘Mother Trees’ Are Intelligent.”

46. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 213.

47. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 214–15.

48. Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 42–43. Besides narrative transfer, other examples of mass transfer strategies include the genocide of Indigenous groups, de-authenticating Indigenous groups, assimilating Indigenous groups, and other strategies of erasure.

49. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 183–86.

isolated white settlements on the lip of a red continent.”<sup>50</sup> Recently, Edward Watts has rediscovered a common popular myth from the early nineteenth century about a group of twelfth-century Welsh immigrants who settled in the New World prior to Columbus, became “Welsh Indians,” and concretized English descendants’ belonging within the Americas. A common thread running through these instances of appropriation is the settler colonial anxiety that, although the land may belong to them under the Doctrine of Discovery, culturally they do not belong to the land: there is a disconnect between their European roots and the natural American landscape that threatens the authenticity of this legal belonging.<sup>51</sup>

Although this anxiety may feel less immediate in the twenty-first century and the figure of the vanishing Indian dominates the American imagination—as opposed to living on the “lip of a red continent”—a similar anxiety about the authenticity of belonging is reintroduced in the emerging threat of climate change and other environmental tragedies. Much as the characters of *The Overstory* emerge from mythic, intimate relationships with trees in their “Roots” chapters to a dystopic reality of resource extraction and deforestation, settler Americans emerge from a continent colonized for its abundant resources into one where these resources are becoming fearfully scarce. Generally speaking, European thinking traditionally conceives of plants—as one example of the European relationship with resources—as passive beings beneath humans that invite domination and resource manipulation, an approach with foundations in Plato, Aristotle, and the Bible.<sup>52</sup> Although international law in the contemporary era still recognizes the Americas as belonging to settler colonists, the ecological consequences of the European relationship with resources seems to threaten exposing the hidden inauthenticity of European stewardship over Indigenous lands. Thus, in the new crisis of settler anxiety about inauthenticity, it is within the settler colonial tradition to turn again to Indigenous appropriation. Rather than jeopardizing colonial stewardship over occupied land, the settler colonist seeks to “become indigenous again” through transferring Indigenous knowledge into the settler episteme. Considering that, in linguistics and anthropology, the term *native informant* refers to someone from whom the researcher gains access to information about language or culture,<sup>53</sup> this figure in its fictive applications becomes a means through which an author might approach this transfer into and authentication of a settler episteme imagined anew.

### Seeds

Just as the novel opened with Nick Hoel’s “Roots” chapter, so it ends with the conclusion of his story, and a gesture toward what lies beyond the end of *The Overstory*. While the

50. Smith-Rosenberg, “Surrogate Americans,” 1329.

51. Watts, *Colonizing the Past*, 125–44.

52. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, chaps. 1 and 3.

53. Frouzesh, “Politics of Appropriation,” 254.

first section dedicated a traditional chaptering structure to the introduction of each character, as the sprouting of a seed's first tendrils might occur in isolation, the "Seeds" rebirth is told in short vignettes in which each character's story is continually interrupted by another's, their lives having all become interwoven like plants in their ecosystemic dance of reproduction. Nick, by the end of the "Crown" section, has returned to his family farm in Iowa to dig up the tree sculptures he had been making when he met Olivia, and that he and Olivia had buried when they left the farm to travel west together.

By "Seeds," Nick awakens somewhere "north" where the trees appear shaped for heavy snowfall.<sup>54</sup> Lost and with little food left, Nick starts working on "his largest and longest-lasting sculpture . . . [that will remain] until time and living creatures come to transform it."<sup>55</sup> For this task he uses only materials already on the ground, with pieces too big to move remaining in place to dictate the design and create a "shape more discovered than invented."<sup>56</sup> He even "looks at the kinks and camber of each fallen limb and waits for it to tell him where . . . it wants to be."<sup>57</sup> During this communion with plants Nick is suddenly startled by "a man in a red plaid coat . . . with a dog that must be three-quarters wolf" who tells him, "They said there was a crazy white man working out here."<sup>58</sup> After looking at what Nick is creating, he begins to help him. It is not until the next vignette that it is revealed this man is Indigenous American when he "says a few words to the dog in a language so old it sounds like stones tossed in a brook, like needles in a breeze, humming."<sup>59</sup> Having generally gleaned his Indigeneity, the reader is given no further information because "names can't help them any more than *spruce* or *fir* can help these beings all around them."<sup>60</sup> After the two stop for dinner, Nick makes his aforementioned comment about listening to plants speak, to which the man "chuckles. 'We've been trying to tell you that since 1492.'"<sup>61</sup> In the last vignette, the man in the red coat returns for a second day with two twins in sheepskin and a "giant man with a raven profile" to finish the project.<sup>62</sup> Upon completion, Nick's "friends begin to chant in a very old language,"<sup>63</sup> to which Nick adds *Amen*, "if only because it may be the single oldest word he knows. The older the word, the more likely it is to be both useful and true. . . . In fact, . . . the word *tree* and the word *truth* come from the same root."<sup>64</sup> It is on this final linguistic reflection on time, trees, and truth that the identity of Nick's project is revealed, a giant design "[which] satellites high above . . . already take

54. Powers, *Overstory*, 478.

55. Powers, *Overstory*, 485.

56. Powers, *Overstory*, 486.

57. Powers, *Overstory*, 486.

58. Powers, *Overstory*, 486.

59. Powers, *Overstory*, 492.

60. Powers, *Overstory*, 492.

61. Powers, *Overstory*, 493.

62. Powers, *Overstory*, 501.

63. Powers, *Overstory*, 501.

64. Powers, *Overstory*, 501.

pictures [of] from orbit. The shapes turn into letters complete with tendril flourishes, and the letters spell out a gigantic word legible from space: STILL.”<sup>65</sup>

Just as Olivia’s claims to Indigeneity come from an attempt at epistemic reconsideration, so too does the thesis on which Powers ends. In “Seeds” Nick reaches his epiphany that plants are “not hard to hear,”<sup>66</sup> and this is reflected in his approach to “discover” the plants’ positions rather than “inventing” them; he allows the plants to “tell him where . . . [they want] to be.”<sup>67</sup> This reciprocal act of creation directly contrasts the distant, mastering gaze of his ancestors’ photographic project, something that they “invented” in order to understand plant life. Thus, unlike the past Hoels’ removed, mechanical misunderstanding of plant life, which led to agricultural misuse and ruination, the capitalized word *STILL* becomes a translation of what the plants say when in conversation with humanity, a translation which moves toward a Planthropocentric ontology. The word encapsulates stillness, the state of movement through which plants exist and thrive, and the bivalent adverb *still*: as in, despite the Anthropocene, plants are still and will still be here, and as in “even yet.” Garrett Stewart argues that this sculpture is the trees’ own being translated into English, so, while Richard Powers may need to work through a novel of prose to approach plant ontology, the last word is the plant’s simple message of a still life, still abundantly full of living, death, and regeneration.<sup>68</sup>

Plants, however, are not the only forces influencing a renewed episteme in this scene. Rather, Nick is joined by what appears to be linguistic and cultural mediators, or native informants, in the four nameless, tribeless Indigenous American characters who are principally coded by evoking 1492, wearing sheepskin, having a “raven profile,” and speaking an ancient language. It is important to note that contemporary Native authors themselves often do not specify real tribes in their fiction because of concerns over authenticity.<sup>69</sup> It follows, then, that settler American authors would do well to follow their Indigenous American colleagues and refrain from using real tribes’ names in their writing.

At the heart of conflicts over using these names are questions concerning access to a full and authentic depiction of a real group in literature, a pursuit that, by its very nature, cannot succeed and will always rely on some form of essentialism. Simon J. Ortiz, in his 1981 article “Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism,” takes on the topic of Indigenous authenticity, opening with an anecdote about his tribe, the Acoma (Acqumeh), performing an ostensibly Catholic Christian ritual. However, Ortiz claims, “when the celebration is held within the Acqumeh community, it is an

65. Powers, *Overstory*, 502.

66. Powers, *Overstory*, 493.

67. Powers, *Overstory*, 486.

68. Stewart, “Organic Reformations,” 170–71.

69. See the dispute over naming the Osage tribe in Linda Hogan’s *Mean Spirit* with Osage critic Robert Warrior, particularly in Eric Gary Anderson’s analysis. Warrior, “Review Essay,” 52; Anderson, “States of Being,” 58.

Acqumeh ceremony. It is Acqumeh and Indian . . . in the truest and most authentic sense.”<sup>70</sup> He goes on to argue: “Throughout the difficult experience of colonization to the present, Indian women and men have struggled to create meaning of their lives in very definite and systematic ways. The ways or methods have been important, but they are important only because of the reason for the struggle. And it is that reason—the struggle against colonialism—which has given substance to what is authentic.”<sup>71</sup> Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack, and Robert Warrior continue this argument from Ortiz in the book *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, stating that the Acoma people transformed the Catholic ceremony into something itself Indian, rather than hybridizing it.<sup>72</sup> Weaver, Womack, and Warrior argue that some amount of essentialism in these depictions is unavoidable,<sup>73</sup> and that one does not need to be Indigenous to write well and effectively about Indigenous issues,<sup>74</sup> but they also argue for expansive understandings of Indigenous expression and, above all, to privilege Indigenous voices in determining their destiny.<sup>75</sup>

So, while Powers does not use tribal names, similar to Silko and Hogan, do the five pages in which Indigenous characters appear allow them space for an expansive “authenticity” found in the struggle against colonialism? While non-Indigenous authors might write effectively about Indigenous issues, does Powers evoke Indigenous characters for the purposes that Ortiz, Weaver, Womack, and Warrior discuss? Based on the protagonists’ invocation of a cursory Indigeneity earlier in the novel and Nick’s interaction with these characters at the end, I argue that Powers includes Indigenous characters, with or without an assigned tribe, for the ends of discussing, and ultimately authenticating, the settlers’ relationship to land, rather than presenting Indigenous characters on their own terms. Shifting from Indigenous American literary criticism to Spivak’s criticism, I believe Spivak’s notion of the native informant, while not a topic within Ortiz, Weaver, Womack, and Warrior’s work on Indigenous nationalisms, is a useful tool for discussing Powers’s settler literature.

The native informant in literature generally refers to someone from the subaltern who writes their own story, like an author, essayist, or memoirist, but much of the scholarly criticism harbored against colonial reception of work written by the native informant applies to Powers’s own settler evocation of Indigeneity in this final section of *The Overstory*. From a linguistic translation perspective, the reader is encouraged to understand the Indigenous characters as inhabiting the “privileged source of ‘inside’ information, smuggled out past the language barrier” that Michael Cronin describes.<sup>76</sup> While

70. Ortiz, “Towards a National Indian Literature,” 254.

71. Ortiz, “Towards a National Indian Literature,” 256.

72. Weaver, Womack, and Warrior, *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, xix.

73. Weaver, Womack, and Warrior, *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, 96.

74. Weaver, Womack, and Warrior, *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, 197.

75. Weaver, Womack, and Warrior, *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, xxi, 195.

76. Cronin, “Empire Talks Back,” 54.

*STILL*, the Planthropocentric message on which the novel ends, confers legitimacy because “the word *tree* and the word *truth* come from the same root,” Powers makes a point to tell the reader that the men “chant in a very old language”<sup>77</sup> and that the man in the red coat speaks a language that echoes the sounds of nature itself.<sup>78</sup> By evoking the age of the plant language and the age of the Indigenous language together and by describing the Indigenous language as sounding like nature, Powers encourages the reader to understand that the Indigenous men, in one way or another, speak the same language as the plants. It is this shared language between humans and plants that, presumably, aids the men in constructing the still life “with little need for words.”<sup>79</sup> Additionally, when Nick comes to the realization that he too can speak the language of plant stillness, the man in the red coat tells him, “We’ve been trying to tell you that since 1492.”<sup>80</sup> This insinuates that not only have the Indigenous peoples spoken the language of plants since time immemorial, but they have been trying to translate this message through the vegetal language barrier since the moment that their European colonization began.

There are several levels that merit analysis in Powers’s use of the native informant in this section. The first functions on the level of vicious sedimentation and the dénouement’s relationship with temporality in terms of linguistics. By considering the Indigenous characters as speaking ancient languages so old that they are the same as the language of nature itself, Powers again associates Indigeneity with unmoving time instead of ethnic or geographical origin. Nick, by learning to speak the ancient language of plants with the help of an ancient Indigenous translator, is able to transcend the temporal yearning that has controlled much of the novel and to resolve *The Overstory*’s tension between now and before, returning to Jørgen’s original pursuit of living harmoniously with nature.

Turning from the role of the native informant in linguistics to literature, Spivak observes that the native informant, as an author from a subaltern country, primarily functions to provide the West with a view of a homogenous, stable Other. However, since the perspective from this Other is fixed in its requirement to establish the Subject of Europe, this Other can only be a constructed entity. The West’s attempt to find the constructed entity’s perspective is necessarily an imagined pursuit. One only finds a trace of difference, which is then used to indicate an irretrievably heterogenous site, a lost object, an echo of the same. In other words, the native informant can only say that which affirms the colonial imperialist efforts to consolidate the subject of Europe.<sup>81</sup> In Spivak’s words, the native informant “[mouths] for us the answers that we want to hear as

77. Powers, *Overstory*, 501.

78. Powers, *Overstory*, 492.

79. Powers, *Overstory*, 501.

80. Powers, *Overstory*, 493.

81. Frouzesh, “Politics of Appropriation,” 255.

confirmation of our view of the world.”<sup>82</sup> While Powers is not a native informant author, the Indigenous characters in the fictitious world of *The Overstory* fulfill this role for both Nick and for the novel as a whole. Just as the Other is an imagined perspective read from a heterogenous site that confirms a homogenous worldview, the evocation of alterity in the Indigenous subject works to affirm and authenticate the worldview on which the novel concludes, effectively joining the tradition of settler appropriation in the pursuit of an authenticated thesis.

Thus Nick’s return to Jørgen’s initial natural pursuit is authenticated by the native informants who have emerged from *The Overstory*’s overall narrative terra nullius, solely because their presence is now a safe site for the settler characters. Nick no longer lives on the same “lip of a red continent” that his actively colonizing ancestor fought to eliminate. Finally, by Nick’s evoking his oldest word, *Amen*, from the Christian tradition, during the novel’s epistemological reconsideration of humanity’s relationship with nature, the cyclical return to beginnings is complete. While Jørgen transferred Indigenous land to European ownership at the beginning of the novel, Nick uses *Amen* to traverse temporal boundaries and transfer Indigenous knowledge into the settler’s own modern episteme at the novel’s end, echoing past Indigenous exclusion from ownership under the Doctrine of Discovery and its Christian requisite.

Powers’s conflation of Indigeneity with either a pre-Columbian pristine myth or with living so close to a plant ontology that human and vegetal beings metaphorically speak the same language is, overall, the flawed product of centuries of settler colonial tradition. While Nick might superficially learn to implicate humanity into a relationship with vegetal beings, it is significant that the product of this conversation is ultimately meant for “the satellites high up above . . . [taking] pictures from orbit.”<sup>83</sup> Just as Powers continues to rely on settler colonial logic to authenticate *The Overstory*’s environmental theses, the mechanism through which these theses are received, translated, and documented continues to operate with the same imperially masterful gaze that is inherent to photography’s distanced capture—first wielded by the land-centric farmers of Iowa, then by epistemologically focused satellites and their association with artificial intelligence. Sontag, in her explanation of how photography creates the illusion of knowledge and power, says the photograph shares these characteristics with the printed word,<sup>84</sup> and in preparation for writing *The Overstory* Powers engaged in his own search for mastery over plant knowledge by delving into the printed word and reading more than 120 books about trees.<sup>85</sup> Although the closing argument of the novel might be only one word meant to encapsulate plant ontology’s important, poetic simplicity, the novel itself acts as a masterful capture of authenticated, old “truths” caught in the mechanisms of

82. Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 342.

83. *Overstory*, 502.

84. Sontag, “On Photography,” 174.

85. Preston, “Interview with Richard Powers.”

settler colonial culture: cultural appropriation, the native informant, the photograph, the printed word. “Settler colonialism, as an ecological form of domination,” Whyte argues, “is environmental violence.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, while it is true that settler epistemologies do need to learn from alternative stewardship methods, the message that bolsters *The Overstory*—beyond STILL—is that the ecological future is dominated by sympathetic settler actors that leave no real room for nameless, flat stereotypes from whom the settlers might guess how the continent was once kept so pristine.

Instead of trying to reinvent the Doctrine of Discovery for the age of climate crisis—this time through claiming Indigenous knowledge with which to steward the already-claimed Indigenous land—one might turn to a different, less comfortable model of subversion. In the stark words of Gordon Pablo, an elder and spokesperson of the Wuthathi People in Australia: “People think we want money, that we want compensation or royalties. *We want the land only.*”<sup>87</sup> Thus, while plant and Indigenous ontologies might disrupt the European-accepted worldview that resources were meant for extraction, truly radical alterity lies in conceiving a world where settler colonists relinquish the power of definitive, exclusionary ownership over both knowledge and stewardship. In addition to the ecological interdependence that is the focus of *The Overstory*, what else lies at the end of a broader, more unsettling path toward renewed relationships with the current systems of power, ownership, and control?

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86. Whyte, “Settler Colonialism,” 137.

87. Pablo, “The Land Is My Mother,” quoted in Childs, *Transcommunalities*, 30.



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