Volume XIII Number 1

Winter 2025

Northern Plains Ethics Journal
Dennis R. Cooley, editor-in-chief

Editorial Board
Anthony Flood
Bradley Morris
Adam Taylor
Kate Cook

Layout/Copy Editor
Terence Jackson

Mission

The *NPEJ's* mission is to create a high-quality dedicated publication platform to promote democratic participation in social and ethical issues affecting the Northern Plains and beyond, including, of course, the entire state of North Dakota.

To succeed, the *NPEJ* hopes to become a marketplace for the accumulation, dissemination, discussion, and recognition of scholarly work, ideas, and other work related to ethics affecting communities in North Dakota.

Published by Northern Plains Ethics Institute
North Dakota State University
Fargo, North Dakota

https://www.ndsu.edu/institutes/northernplainsethics/the_northern_plains_ethics_journal/

Editors' note*: Unless otherwise noted, the views expressed in this journal do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors, the Northern Plains Ethics Institute, North Dakota State University, or the North Dakota University System.*

Volume XIII Number 1

Northern Plains Ethics Journal

Contents

Scholar

Personal Unity: A Case for Why Unum is Positive in Aquinas
(1-13)
Anthony Flood, Professor
North Dakota State University

Community

Brick by Brick: The Dismantling of Higher Education
(17-35)
Dean L. Bresciani, Professor
North Dakota State University

Priorities and Metrics
(37-43)
Leann Wolff
Great Outcomes Consulting
Associate Director, Northern Plains Ethics Institute

Student

An Analysis of Public and Waldorf School Systems: The Influence of Colonialism
(47-55)
McKenna Faith Zaleski Crance
Class of 2028, Macalester College

Maternalism Toward Environment in Richard Powers' The Overstory and Bewilderment
(57-88)
Md Mozaffor Hossain
Teaching Assistant, PhD (1st Year)
Department of English, Ohio University

Winter 2025

Scholar Section

Personal Unity: A Case for Why Unum is Positive in Aquinas

Anthony Flood
Professor, North Dakota State University

Abstract

Thomas Aquinas characterizes the transcendental unum/unity/oneness as a negative concept, expressing only indivision. However, he has other texts pointing to a positive meaning of the same notion. This paper suggests that one of the reasons for this ambivalence is his grappling with the reality of personal unity. The case begins by first treating the current literature on unum as positive. The paper proceeds to examine the key connections and principles between unity and love. The final section shows that when Aquinas applies these principles to personal beings, he intimates something more than a mere lack of something. Unity as purely negative cannot do justice to persons as persons, and thereby Aquinas broadens it.

Keywords: Aquinas, unity, oneness, metaphysical

Metaphysical questions often seem far removed from everyday life and practical matters, leading some to wonder just how important they are. Frequently, though, some such question or distinction have surprising connections to indispensable notions within ordinary discourse and discussion. Similarly, and sometimes even embedded in the above, a thinker's metaphysical views and principles are challenged by a newfound or at least deepening appreciation of a more basic, less negotiable experience of reality. This paper looks to one such case in the form of Thomas Aquinas softening his understanding of unity or *unum* in order to accommodate the uniqueness of persons. In turn, this leads to insight into what it means to exist as a person.

This paper ties into an ongoing scholarly discussion concerning whether the fundamental meaning or *ratio* of *unum/*unity/oneness is purely negative or has positive notes in the thought of Aquinas. While he consistently states that it is negative, he seems to be more ambivalent in other passages. "Negative," here, does not mean bad; rather, just as indicating an absence of something of note. This paper offers a twofold case that Aquinas affirms in the latter part of his career that the *ratio* or basic meaning of unity has a positive note of perfection, and a (if not the)

principal reason is the reality and complexity of personal unity. While speculative, this is a reasonable interpretation, particularly given his account of the relation between unity and love.

His thoughts on such matters goes a long way to showing the importance that he attaches to the concept of person and his increased appreciation for its uniqueness as time went on. He freely states that "*Person* signifies what is most perfect in all of nature—that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature."[1] Personhood is not merely valuable, it is that which resides at and perhaps even constitutes the apex of value. What is means to exist as a person, particularly in light of one's subjective interior life, though, can be puzzling. It appears to Aquinas that the person as person can have greater and lesser degrees of unity. This, though, would be in tension with unity as an all or nothing sort of thing. While, then, this paper is concerned with some of the technicalities of Aquinas's metaphysics, it also relates to practical questions of personhood, dignity, and the salutary effects of moral progress. The first section offers a sketch of the literature on unity as positive. The second section turns to the principal relations between unity and love on his account. The third part addresses love's unifying power in relation to persons, particularly human beings.

The Transcendentals and the Meaning of *Unum*

Aquinas's characterization of unity as negative comes out of his account of the transcendentals. A transcendental is a property found in all things. The word "transcendental," in this sense, means that such a property "transcends" or goes beyond any other distinction. Stronger still, he contends each of the transcendental notions is simply a different way of talking about being itself. In other words each notion is co-extensive with being itself. For example, 'Evening Star" and "Morning Star" mean different things—each has its own *ratio,* intelligible content, or sense, but they refer to the same thing, namely Venus. While the referent is the same, each term characterizes Venus in a relational way. The morning star is Venus as viewed at dawn, etc. Similarly, "unity" and the other transcendentals are terms that have their own intelligible content or sense, but they all have the same referent, namely being itself.

Aquinas treats the transcendentals throughout his writings, but the pithy formulation he offers in *De Veritate* (*DV)* tends to be the starting point of most

[1] Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by Fr. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., of the English Dominican Province and edited and revised by The Aquinas Institute and its collaborators. Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012, I, 29, 3.

analyses of his account.[2] He addresses five properties of being in common or as pertaining to each and every being (*ens*): thing (*res*), one/unity (*unum*), something (*aliquid*), good (*bonum*), and truth (*verum*).[3] The first two pertain to being considered absolutely (*in se*). He then distinguishes being as understood positively and negatively. A being is a thing in virtue of its essence or quiddity, which differs from the *ratio* or intelligible content of "being" as the act of existence itself. Both essence (Aquinas elsewhere uses the term "substance"[4]) and existence express a positive mode of being. Being considered absolutely, but negatively, forms the intelligible content of unity or oneness as "a negation consequent upon every being considered absolutely: its undividedness."[5] The remaining three are relational (*in ordine ad aliud*). A being is something insofar as it is divided from others. The good relates to appetitive powers — being as appetible or desirable, while truth corresponds to the apprehensive or cognitive powers — being as knowable.

In *DV*, then, Aquinas characterizes *unum* as purely negative as indivision. Again, this is the logical, not moral, sense of negation. He is not saying "unity" connotes some privation or negation that should be present in a thing, like how "blindness" indicates a privation of something that typically is present. Rather, it is a negation similar to "independent," which simply means not dependent. "Indivision," or to use the more common term "individual" just means a thing that cannot be divided without loss of being. While *DV* is a middle work in terms of Aquinas's career, he formulates the *ratio* of unity as negative even in the much later *Summa Theologiae (ST)*. In an early question, he states, "*One/Unity* does not include the idea of perfection, but only of indivision, which belongs to everything according to its own essence."[6] Based on these passages, it would seem that the intelligible content of unity is purely negative. Surprisingly, though, particularly in his later writings, Aquinas is more ambivalent in his analyses.

---

[2] *De Veritate,* I, 1. Jan Aertsen offers a helpful analysis of the influence of particularly Philip the Chancellor and Albert the Great have on Aquinas's understanding of the transcendentals, particularly as expressed in *DV*. *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas.* Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996, chapter 1.

[3] Aquinas does not typically include beauty as a transcendental, though some passages point toward it, such as *ST,* I, 39, 8. Jan Aertsen argues it is not a distinct transcendental property of being, but that "the beautiful is implied in the order of truth and goodness." *Ibid.,* 359. For a recent defense of the rightful inclusion of beauty as a Thomistic transcendental, see Thomas Joseph White, O.P., "Beauty, Transcendence, and the Inclusive Hierarchy of Creation." *Nova et Vetera* 16: 4, 2018: 1215-1226.

[4] "Every being is one by its substance." *ST*, I, 11, 4, ad 3.

[5] Aquinas, Thomas, *On Truth*. Translated by Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994, I, 1.

[6] *ST,* I, 6, 3, ad 2.

These other passages from later writings are sufficiently strong to allow scholars such as Dave Svoboda to ask the following:

> Aquinas's reflections concerning the character of the negation comprised by the concept of one have brought us to the question whether the proper character (*ratio)* of unity consists in a "positive" entity of being or rather in the negation of division.[7]

Svoboda, Jan Aertsen, and Bernhard Blankenhorn all make the case that Aquinas includes positive content to the *ratio* of unity, and it is indeed a perfection.[8] The chief sources of this interpretation are found in question 11 of the first part of the *ST*, along with question 103, 3. Question 11 concerns the unity of God. Aquinas speaks of God as supremely one, indicating both degrees of unity and something perfective about unity. Both considerations point toward something more than negative. In 103, 3, Aquinas argues that the world is governed by one, and in the course of doing so notes that "unity belongs to the idea (*rationem*) of goodness." Even in the earlier *Summa Contra Gentiles* (*SCG),* Aquinas contends that there is a positive note to unity. For instance, addressing creation, he states, "And because in God, the summit of all things, there is found the most perfect unity, and since a thing's power and worth is greater the more it is one, it follows that the further we recede from the first principle, the more do we find things to be diversified and varied."[9]

Aertsen notes that if unity belongs to the *ratio* of goodness, then "it is apparent that underlying the determination of unity as indivison is a perfection that could be described as 'inner coherence and persistence' or 'being whole.'"[10] When Svoboda takes stock of Aquinas's characterization of unity as negative, he asks the following questions:

> In the context of Aquinas's argumentation for the ontological foundation of the convertibility of one and being it seems highly doubtful that Unity should have a negative character. If Unity does

[7] David Svoboda, *Aquinas on One and Many*. Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: editiones scholasticae 2015, 67.

[8] The principal scholarly assessment that affirms Aquinas's understanding of *unum* is purely negative is Joseph Owens, C.Ss. R., "Unity and Essence in St Thomas Aquinas." *Mediaeval Studies* 23 (1961): 240-259.

[9] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles.* Translated by Fr. Laurence Shapcote, O.P. of the English Dominican Province and edited and revised by The Aquinas Institute and its collaborators. Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2018. IV, 1.

[10] Aertsen, 240.

> not have the character of perfection and consists only in the negation or privation of division, why does every thing naturally guard its Unity, as it protects its act of existence? Why would every being naturally guard something negative?[11]

Blankenhorn makes the boldest claim of the three. He maintains that Aquinas's understanding develops fairly significantly over time. In the *Commentary on Lombard's Sentences* through *DV*, Aquinas holds that *unum* simply refers to the essence of a thing; since the essence of a thing suffices to account for why it is one, then there is no need to find any other principle to explain things. Consequently, unity has a purely negative *ratio* as essential, internal indivision and is not a perfection. Beginning with the *SCG* and culminating in the *ST*, Aquinas's understanding develops to the point where the negative aspect is secondary. Blankenhorn's concluding claim reads as such:

> Things are primarily one by their *esse,* thus, by participation. Secondarily and necessarily, things have unity from their *essence*, from the single nature that informs them. This interpretation allows us to make sense of a vast range of texts on unity in Aquinas, while only excluding the denial of essence's participation in unity in *DV* 21 and the denial of unity as a positive notion in various places, including *ST* I, 6.3, ad 1. Thomas's doctrine of unity is not perfectly consistent, but there is a progression of thought towards a position that allows him to explain the unity of beings that we experience every day.[12]

Why such a dramatic shift? Blankenhorn argues that Aquinas begins to link unity with actuality, first with God as purely simple and most unified and then to all beings. Created beings are one in some significant sense because they are in act. Essence is a potency that is actualized through an act of existence. Thus, real, existing beings are one and unified because of their existence. As *esse* in created beings is a participated perfection, then unity must be as well. "*Esse* is the underlying perfection that is really the same as the unity and goodness of things."[13]

---

[11] David Svoboda, "The *Ratio* of Unity: Positive or Negative? The Case of Thomas Aquinas. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86:1 (2012): 47-70, 68.

[12] Bernhard Blankenhorn, O.P., "Aquinas on the Transcendental One: An Overlooked Development of Doctrine" *Angelicum* 81:3 (2004): 615-637, 632.

[13] Blankenhorn, 630.

Unum and Love

Aquinas attends to several important connections between the notion of unity and love. So much so, that unity forms much of the metaphysical underpinnings of how love operates.[14] This section looks at a couple of the important links that he then uses to discuss personal unity. He offers two key principles with respect to unity and love. One, unity is the source of union, and two, love is a unitive force. Aquinas states:

> [I]n this way we must hold that, properly speaking, a man is not a friend to himself, but something more than a friend, since friendship implies union, for Dionysius says (*Div. Nom.* Iv) that *love is a unitive force,* whereas a man is one with himself which is more than being united to another. Hence, just as unity is the principle of union (*unitas est principium unionis*), so the love with which a man loves himself is the form and root of friendship.[15]

Love itself is structured by underlying metaphysical considerations in general, and the specific consideration doing the heavy lifting is unity. Unity is prior to the union of two things, and more importantly, unity is the very source of union. Whenever a union exists, it is due to metaphysically prior unities that entered into the union — in other words, union is a derivative reality. In turn, love, as a unitive force, seeks union, and it too presupposes and is consequent to unity. In the case of this passage, the fact that a person has unity is the reason one loves oneself, and that love, in turn, extends toward others in the desire for a union with them.

Aquinas elaborates on the role unity performs in both the love of self and love of others in the context of what he calls the three unions of love, though, in fact, he actually addresses four notions: substantial unity followed by similitude, affection, and possession. The reason for the "extra" consideration is due to the nature of substantial union, which is not a union of two things but rather unity itself. Substantial unity then forms the foundation for the union of similitude or likeness between things.

> Union has a threefold relation to love. There is union which causes love; and this is substantial union, as regards the love with which one loves oneself; while as regards the love wherewith one loves others things, it is the union of likeness…There is also a union

---

[14] I treat the extensive connections between unity and love in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Love: Aquinas on Unity, Union, and Participation.* Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018.

[15] *ST,* II-II, 25, 4.

> which is essentially love itself. This union is according to the bond of affection, and is likened to substantial union, inasmuch as the lover stands to the object of his love, as to himself, if it be love of friendship; as to something belonging to himself, if it be the love of concupiscence. Again, there is a union, which is the effect of love. This is real union, which the lover seeks with the object of his love.[16]

Love as a moving force, as the impulse and drive, for union with goods or other persons springs from unity; it is the "union which causes love" before all else. The affective dimensions of love are consequent to the unity as a cause of the love. If love is unimpeded, then it leads to real union with the good or other person loved. Unity is the principle of the affective and real union: "there arises in every lover the desire to be united as far as possible with the beloved: hence nothing gives greater pleasure to friends than living together."[17]

The end of love is union with the object or person loved, while the beginning is unity. The basic inclination of each being is to preserve itself—to maintain its undividedness, for to lose it is to cease to be. "A thing has being according as it has unity. Hence every thing shuns division so far as it can, lest it thus tend to non-being."[18] Substantial unity, furthermore, sets the parameters for the orientation and intensity of love. This is why Aquinas insists that the love of self must be greater than the love of others. Because unity is the principle of union, a union can never achieve the same level of reality as unity.[19] The passage above on the three unions of love concludes as such:

> [Real] union is in keeping with the demands of love: for as the Philosopher relates (*Polit.* Ii, 1), *Aristophanes stated that lovers would wish to be united both into one*, but since *this would result in either one or both being destroyed*, they seek a suitable and becoming union—to love together, speak together, and be united together in other things.[20]

---

[16] *ST,* I-II, 28, 1, ad 2

[17] *SCG,* III, 153.

[18] *SCG*, I, 42. Svoboda (2015) speaks of the relation of unity to the principle of contradiction. 49-52.

[19] "As to be one is better than to be united, so there is more oneness in love which is directed to self than in love which is directed to another." *ST,* I, 60, 3, ad 2.

[20] *ST,* I-II, 28, 1, ad 2

Unity causes love, and love impels union. Nevertheless, the union must remain, not a unity, but two separate beings, two separate unities united. The measure of friendship is the degree to which its union approximates to the substantial unities forming the structural basis for it. The greater the friendship, the more the two people are united in affections, presence, activities, etc. The weaker the friendship, the less united they are in such matters. In either case, the love between persons is preceded by the love of self prompted by substantial unity. Unpacking what Aquinas means by the priority of the love of self and its role in the life of a person reveals the complexity of the notion of unity beyond just indivision.

Unum **and Persons**

The love of self exceeds the love of others precisely due to the structuring role of unity. Self-love, it turns out, has a unifying role within the person. This is the primary context, namely the involved nature of personal unity, where Aquinas has some recognition that unity as purely negative is insufficient. Negative indivision works well for speaking of the unity of non-persons. However, when Aquinas delves into the structure of rational beings in general, and human beings in particular, it is clear there are parts that can be more or less united. In other words, it is very clear that the human being, having both an inward and outward dimension, leads to possibilities not found in non-rational beings. A non-rational being lacks the self-presence of interiority.[21] However, rational beings have an interiority or a heart, which for Aquinas, is the intellect, will, and the affections as rooted in the will.[22] It is possible to weaken the unity of the interior life — the "inward man," as Aquinas terms it — by vice. Weakening the interior life weakens the whole. Unity as solely negative does not do justice to the unity of persons. Thus, there is a trajectory of increasingly strong statements by Aquinas from the *SCG* onwards toward a positive *ratio* as well.

My argument appeals to the degrees of unity principle that Aquinas articulates first in relation to God, the ultimate personal being, and then applies to all persons. The clearest version is given in his response to the question of whether

---

[21] Aquinas would deny that animals have such self-presence. I leave that issue to the side and focus just on his remarks that persons do have it.

[22] There have been several monographs written on Aquinas's view of the passions and affections in the last several years, all of which defend an interpretation of Aquinas inclusive of a robust affirmation of them as central to human nature. The general scholarship consensus is that the passions derive from sensory apprehension, while the affections connect to rational apprehension and the rational appetite. For a couple of representative works, see Nicholas E. Lombardo, O.P., *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011, and Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

God is supremely one. As the authors previously cited have noted, given that the adverb "supremely" conveys degrees, unity must be more than just simple indivision.

> Since one is an undivided being, if anything is supremely one it must be supremely being, and supremely undivided. Now both of these belong to God. For he is supremely being, inasmuch as His being is not determined by any nature to which it is adjoined; since He is being itself, subsistent, absolutely undetermined. But He is supremely undivided inasmuch as He is divided neither actually nor potentially, by any mode of division, since He is altogether simple…Hence it is manifest that God is one in the supreme degree.[23]

Human beings, both as a composite of body and soul but also as having parts/powers of the soul, exist in a state of potential division. The degree of the unity of human persons is determined in some way by the ordering of various parts. Speaking to the relationship between unity and a whole, Svoboda notes the following:

> While unity in the proper sense means the indivision of an entity, whole includes not only the indivision of its parts but also the integrity of parts which are in some way *ordered.* The ordering of the parts of a whole follows its unity and comes from the form of a thing.[24]

In terms of human beings, the integrity of the parts has a specific connection to virtue.

In a perfect state human beings would have perfect interior integrity and harmony. Aquinas explains this in terms of a full possession of the virtues, though only in a qualified sense for the virtues that presuppose imperfection.

---

[23] *ST*, I, 11, 4.

[24] David Svoboda, "Thomas Aquinas on Whole and Part." *The Thomist* 76:2, (2012): 273-304, 297-298. Prior to this, he asks "If every whole is a one, is conversely every one a whole? The answer is no; however, in order to grasp this properly, we need to consider the following. According to Aquinas, unity comprises two aspects: an entity and its indivision. Unity can be predicated not of things that are actually undivided, but also of things that are indivisible by nature because they have no parts at all. Indivisible things are simple and as such have the 'highest degree' of unity. Unity can therefore be both the unity of something simple and the unity of something composite, that is, the unity of a whole." 297.

> In the state of innocence man in a certain sense possessed all the virtues…For it was shown above that such was the rectitude of the primitive state, that reason was subject to God, and the lower powers to reason. Now the virtues are nothing but those perfections whereby reason is directed to God, and the interior powers regulated according to the dictate of reason…Wherefore the rectitude of the primitive state required that man should in a sense possess every virtue.[25]

Through having our interior parts perfectly ordered by the virtues, human persons are unified wholes to the highest and best degree possible, given human nature. By contrast, in a non-perfect state, persons lack the requisite ordering of parts that would give us the greatest unity. However, through the virtues, a person aims for an integrated unity that is the best possible unity.

The process goes well or badly depending upon the fundamental orientation of the love of self that springs forth from substantial unity. Love is a unitive force. Generally, this has to do with the unification of two separate beings. However, in the case of the love of self, love's unitive power pertains to the fostering or the unraveling of personal integrity. For Aquinas, love as the proper act of the will is the source of all a person's actions, both good and bad. Moreover, the love of self as proceeding directly from substantial unity and forming the model and template for relating to others constitutes the starting point of the will's love. Aquinas articulates these points in terms of three kinds of self-love — common, good, and wicked, and the implications for each.

> Love of self is common to all, in one way; in another way it is proper to the good; in a third way, it is proper to the wicked. For it is common to all for each one to love what he thinks himself to be. Now a man is said to be a thing, in two ways: first, in respect of his substance and nature, and, this way all think themselves to be what they are, that is, composed of soul and body. In this way too, all men, both good and wicked, love themselves, insofar as they love their own perfection.[26]

Common self-love is the love that springs from substantial unity and that which inclines a person to preserve one's own unity.

[25] *ST,* I, 95, 3.
[26] *ST,* II-II, 25, 7.

Aquinas contends that due to the complex nature of human nature, a person can choose to love principally the interior rational powers or the sensitive nature. The former is the predominant part of a human being and ought to be loved first.

> A man is said to be something in respect of some predominance, as the sovereign of the state is spoken of as being the state, and so, what the sovereign does, the state is said to do. In this way, all do not think themselves to be what they are. For the reasoning mind is the predominant part of man, while the sensitive and corporeal nature takes the second place, the former of which the Apostle calls the *inward man,* and the latter, the *outward man* (2 Cor 4:16).[27]

The wicked tend toward their corporeal nature. This serves to intensify the disorder already present in wounded human nature. For the highest degree of unity relative to human nature, reason should be subject to the highest good and the lower powers to reason. The inordinate love of one's corporeal nature undermines any substantive subordination of the lower powers to reason. Thus, within bad self-love, love's unitive force is directed badly, and, over time, a person tends toward disintegration.

Aquinas adds that this objective disorder leads to a negative self-experience, which one should expect of a being with an inward dimension.

> The wicked have no wish to be preserved in the integrity of the inward man…nor do they take pleasure in their own company by entering into their own hearts, because whatever they find there, present, past, and future, is evil and horrible.[28]

The interior dimension of the person is avoided as much as possible. Common self-love remains but insofar as it is perverted and disordered, it cannot do its full job, so to speak, in guarding against the loss of unity. It is reduced to a drive guarding against bodily destruction. The self-love proper to the good person is the reverse of the wicked. Proper self-love gravitates toward the rational powers and their

---

[27] *ST,* II-II, 25, 7. The passage continues, "Now the good look upon their rational nature or the inward man as being the chief thing in them, wherefore in this way they think themselves to be what they are. On the other hand, the wicked reckon their sensitive and corporeal nature, or the outward man, to hold first place. Wherefore, since they know not themselves aright, they do not love themselves aright, but love what they think themselves to be. But the good know themselves truly, and therefore truly love themselves."

[28] *ST*, II-II, 25, 7.

proper orientation. In short, it seeks to unify the parts of oneself properly through reason's subordinating to goodness and truth and the lower powers to reason — in moral terms, the cultivation of virtue.[29] The end result is greater personal unity.

To conclude, due to facts of the composite nature of the human person, the integrity of the inward dimension is the integrity of the whole person. Love is the binding force that pulls the parts of the person together into the highest degree of unity possible. A virtuous person would then have the best "inner coherence," to use Aertsen's description. Nonpersonal things have no such interior. To characterize their unity negatively as an absence of division, works just fine. A thing is a thing because it is not divided within itself, which in turn, allows it to be separate or divided from other things. The unity of a person being, though, is inextricably connected to an interior dimension.

While unity as absence of division works as a description at the level of the person as thing, it is far less advantageous as a description of the person as person. In terms of his early works and even the occasional remarks in his later writings on unity a purely negative, he is referring to persons in the former way—as things that exist just like all other things. However, as he perceives the gulf between persons and things, he shifts how he speaks of personal unity. Thus, the ambivalence in Aquinas on the meaning of *unum* may well be due to his increased appreciation of the unique notes of personhood as his thinking develops. In short, personal unity, which is far from purely negative, admits of degrees, and has a positive note of perfection.

References

Aertsen, Jan. *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas.* Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996.

Aquinas, Thomas. *On Truth*. Translated by Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994.

-----. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by Fr. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., of the English Dominican Province and edited and revised by The Aquinas

[29] Aquinas characterizes the properties of proper self-love as the roots of the distinct properties of friendship: longing, benevolence, beneficence, delight, and concord. Each of these connects to the self-unifying nature of love in some way: "In this way the good love themselves, as to the inward man, because they wish the preservation thereof in its integrity, they desire good things for him, namely spiritual goods, indeed they do their best to obtain them, and they take pleasure in entering into their own hearts, because they find there good thoughts in the present, the memory of past good, and the hope of future good, all of which are sources of pleasure. Likewise they experience no clashing of wills, since their whole soul tends to one thing." *ST,* II-II, 25, 7.

Institute and its collaborators. Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012.

-----. *Summa Contra Gentiles.* Translated by Fr. Laurence Shapcote, O.P. of the English Dominican Province and edited and revised by The Aquinas Institute and its collaborators. Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2018.

Blankenhorn, Bernhard, O.P., "Aquinas on the Transcendental One: An Overlooked Development of Doctrine" *Angelicum* 81:3 (2004): 615-637.

Flood, Anthony T. *The Metaphysical Foundations of Love: Aquinas on Unity, Union, and Participation.* Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018.

Lombardo, Nicholas E., O.P. *The Logic of Desire: Aquinas on Emotion*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011.

Miner, Robert. *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Owens, Joseph, C.Ss.R.. "Unity and Essence in St Thomas Aquinas." *Mediaeval Studies* 23 (1961): 240-259.

Svoboda, David. "The *Ratio* of Unity: Positive or Negative? The Case of Thomas Aquinas. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86:1 (2012): 47-70, 68.

-----. "Thomas Aquinas on Whole and Part." *The Thomist* 76:2 (2012): 273-304.

-----. *Aquinas on One and Many*. Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: editiones scholasticae 2015.

White, Thomas Joseph, O.P. "Beauty, Transcendence, and the Inclusive Hierarchy of Creation." *Nova et Vetera* 16:4 (2018): 1215-1226.

Anthony Flood, *Professor of Philosophy, is a member of the Faculty for the School of Humanities at North Dakota State University. Research interests: Virtue Ethics, History of Ethics. His research interests are virtue ethics and the history of ethics.*

Winter 2025

Community Section

Brick by Brick: The Dismantling of Higher Education

Dean L. Bresciani
Professor of Education, North Dakota State University

Abstract

That U.S. higher education is broadly under fire is neither a revelation or surprise. In some sense that should not be a surprise, as it represents an extraordinarily complicated model that is difficult for external observers to understand. As a result, U.S. higher education offers an easy range of points for targeting criticisms.

Nonetheless, higher education in this country remains a sought-after and accessible commodity for more students than ever before in U.S. history. It is also a valued if not irreplaceable source of unbiased, peer-reviewed new research and knowledge fueling a robust economy. Those aspects result in a quality of life, for most Americans, which rivals most worldwide peers.

All that being the case begs the question of why detractors want to purposefully dismantle higher education? Or is its potential dismantling simply a collective result of coincidental factors?

Keywords: Higher education, faculty, academic freedom, shared governance, presidents, autonomy, oversight, ROI, enrollments, athletics, athletes

Introduction

In 1640, Henry Dunster was named as the first president of Harvard College. He was provided wide latitude in establishing, developing, and guiding the first formally organized college in the American colonies, and did so for the following 14 years. Many of his accomplishments and legacies survive to this day, and in the process Harvard (now) University became the aspirational model for this country's extensive array of higher education institutions.

Claudine Gay became Harvard University's 30th president on July 1, 2023. Gay had previously led Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences,

prior to which she served in a variety of administrative and academic roles there. As such, she was a well-known entity at Harvard, and of particular note would be its first African American president.

In December of 2023, Gay was called to testify, along with presidents Sally Kornbluth of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Liz Magill of the University of Pennsylvania, regarding their respective responses to unrest which at the time was common to their campuses. Those three were followed by congressional summons to four other presidents; Minouche Shakfik of Columbia University, Gene Block of the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA), Jonathan Holloway of Rutgers University, and Michael Schill of Northwestern University.

Roughly six months later, on January 1, 2024, Gay's leadership of Harvard abruptly ended. Gay's resignation, after such a sort tenure, received considerable media attention. Of the seven presidents summoned before congress, though, five others would soon after leave their position.

Historically, private institutions enjoyed insulation from public sector political oversight and intervention. That being the case, so many presidents and in particular prestigious private university presidents being called before what would become three congressional hearings was noteworthy. Noteworthy both in precedent, and illustration, of external forces which are increasingly coming to bear on higher education in the United States (Simama 2024; Novak 2023; Wippman & Altschuler 2022).

It is inarguable that like most leadership roles in both public and private sectors, there are certainly circumstances that can bring about premature leadership terminations or resignations. Generally speaking, though, past leadership of higher education institutions has until recently been relatively stable, particular for those in the private education sector.

In the last several decades the tenures of university leaders have been steadily growing shorter. At the same time, traditional paths preparing and leading to higher education senior leadership have been yielding fewer and fewer individuals interested in such roles (Jesse 2023). Generally cited as the causes are the mounting pressures and often inevitable institutional criticisms such leaders increasingly face. In fact, those external pressures and steadily declining average presidential tenures, particularly but not uniquely of public university presidencies, are signaling the larger issues chipping away, brick-by-brick, at the foundation of American higher education.

U.S. higher education's breadth and quality has been recognized worldwide as one of, if not *the* best (U.S. News 2025; Nietzel 2024; Times HED 2023). In light of that, it becomes even more provocative that the American institution of higher education is now so regularly under fire from so many constituencies.

The collective politicization and criticism of virtually all aspects of this country's higher education warrants examination on the brick-by-brick basis noted above. That examination will be discussed through six points of focus:

- Institutional Presidencies
- Faculty, Academic Freedom, and Shared Governance
- Campus Autonomy and Oversight
- Real versus Perceived Return on Investment in Higher Education
- Declining Enrollments
- Athletics and Athletes

Institutional Presidencies

The average tenure of university presidents has been steadily if not precipitously falling over the past several decades as the data attests. In just the past three American Council on Education (ACE) *American College President Studies*, tenures have progressively dropped from 8.5 years to 6.5 years to 5.9 years. Other sources peg presidential tenures as averaging 3-5 years.

Before the current trend developed, it was common for university presidencies to last more than a decade (sans exceptional but infrequent circumstances of maleficence or glaring performance issues). Current circumstances result in a lack of continuity, competing if not conflicting shifts in institutional direction and priorities, and a resulting cascade of subordinate leadership turnover throughout an institution. All of those factors collectively lead to institutional instability that cannot help but result in substantially hindered university performance.

Both historically and still most common, the path to a presidency was through a progression of academic leadership steps starting with promotion and tenure as a faculty member, to departmental and then college leadership, and ultimately a provost position prior to accepting a university presidency. Evidence suggests, however, that alternative paths are increasingly being used to externally broaden candidate pools at the same time as a reciprocal decrease in the number of internal higher education leaders aptly suited to or interested in a university presidency (Gardner 2024; Jesse 2023; Zackel 2022; Seltzer 2012).

Alternative paths are most commonly corporate business leaders, senior military officers, and both state and federal politicians. In most circumstances, such individuals are portrayed as having commendable experience leading large, complex organizations or bringing with them preexisting experience and working relationships with political constituencies impacting college and university campuses. In fairness, many such individuals do bring with them skills in one or even many areas of their previous roles. Those competencies are cast as

transferable to the demands of university leadership, and assumed to be applicable to the culture and operations of universities.

The evidence suggests that the success of such individuals is, however, unproven to say the least and their tenures tend to be short. A variety of causal factors explain why such individuals only infrequently remain in their role. They often lack familiarity with and understanding of the powerful influences inherent in campus cultures, a lack of capacity to translate and apply previous organizational leadership skills to higher education environments, and an inability to successfully maintain and tap in to support from political sources – all of which are contrary to assumptions made during their hiring process. That common lack of success, and resulting expedited turnover, further compound the growing gaps in institutional leadership.

Whether through increasingly thin traditional paths to higher education leadership, or the common failures of external options, many ponder if other factors are also driving the steady tenure decline in campus presidencies. Common themes appear to be the broadening external constituencies which feel empowered to claim and exert their authority, the often-competing if not conflicting nature of those constituencies, constituents' easy access to and ability to be heard in an unchecked manner through both traditional and social media outlets, and the lack of "backstop," from any source, for presidents who come under fire from any of the afore mentioned groups. Parties ranging from the popular media, to higher education oversight boards, to state and even federal political influences, all seem ready and able to quickly position themselves too as critics anytime higher education is under fire. Complicating the matter further, traditional campus constituencies of students, faculty, and staff, have become increasingly fractured in to smaller and often times competing interest groups with easy willingness and ready capacities to broadly air their grievances.

Collectively, ready criticisms add to the difficult if not impossible political juggling act institutional leaders are expected to maintain. Successfully doing so, even for the most experienced and prepared, is monumentally challenging (Thorp 2024). More often than not, those institutional leaders are held solely responsible for whatever issues surface. In an environment where more leaders come to their role with limited capacities to be successful (Jesse 2023), disappointing results shouldn't be surprising.

The old organizational axiom "make a five-year plan, but leave in three" has become what some believe as the only successful means of navigating through and past the above juggernaut of clashing interests. If presidential tenure statistics are any indication, most who don't leave are in short order susceptible if not likely to be removed, replace or forced to retire as a result of the myriad issues small to large, over which presidents generally have little control. Some presidents have become particularly adept at spring-boarding from one campus to another before

detractors can weight them down. But those that are successful in moving on, only worsen the problem for the institutions they leave.

The damaging implications of ever-churning leadership criticisms rarely seem to enter the minds of the afore mentioned critical constituencies, but are painfully obvious to scholars and observers of organizational performance. The cost of that churning leadership, in both figurative and literal terms, is substantial. As a result, institutional initiatives come and go with changes in leadership. Most such initiatives are time, energy, and resource dependent. Institutional memory suffers as former leaders give way to their replacements who often have to "start from scratch" if not relearn their predecessor's mistakes. Political allies and campus supporters have to be reestablished, which both is not a given and is often made more challenging with changes in institutional leadership and leadership styles (Moody 2023). Collectively, the slowing if not halting of institutional forward momentum becomes likely if not inevitable. Those implications, in turn, also no doubt further contribute to criticisms of higher education when in one example after another, universities consistently appear to be stumbling over their own feet.

Faculty, Academic Freedom, and Shared Governance

The early roots of American college faculty roles are found in the moral and ethical development of privileged male students being prepared for spiritual, civic, and business leadership, and the not unrelated maintenance of social class boundaries. Preparation of young men to be leaders of gentlemanly demeanor was important. But otherwise extremely low literacy rates, and at best rudimentary educational attainment of the general population, meant that those with secondary and postsecondary education levels were uniquely positioned for any roles requiring command of a basic liberal art education. Those without such education were generally and effectively barred from rising above their lower socioeconomic standing.

Sometime around the late 1800s, a new faculty focus emerged around the creation and dissemination of knowledge. That reorientation was commonly credited to the influence of German universities, and their priority on scholarly research, which not coincidentally led to prestige.

In the private sector, organizational success is easily measured by efficiency and profit. However, in the public sector, success is less clearly defined. Higher education institutions, mimicking their German counterparts, responded to that feature by acting as prestige maximizers (Bowen 1980). Such higher education institutions were encouraged not only to raise all they could but to expend marginal resources on activities that increased their status (Bresciani 1996), in what has been termed a prestige maximization model (Melguizo and Strober 2007). Simply put, scholarly research leading to the creation of new knowledge, and subsequent

publications thereof, was a means to achieve prestige and a differentiating access to resources. The precipitating impact of that priority further distanced those who were college educated from those who were not.

What was critical to the relatively unique success of American colleges and universities, was the self-direction which faculty had in deciding what to research, and their insulation from undue influences in pursuing their studies. In parallel, freedom to present and teach what they believed, without interference, allowed for American universities to become known for what is commonly referred to as a marketplace for the free exchange of ideas. That relatively unique approach led to U.S. college and university scholarly achievements setting a world-wide standard.

The underlying assumption of U.S. academic freedom was that, while both the best and worst of ideas could be surfaced, when confronted and contrasted in open and unbiased environments of scholarly peer review, the best ideas would over time rise to the top while less viable ideas would fall to the side. Enabling that to be the case required patience and trust in the process of American scholarship, but the superior results spoke for themselves.

Unfortunately, and increasingly over the past decade, critics of that marketplace concept[1], have become extraordinarily vocal and capable of inserting undue influence on everything from what topics can be researched to what (and how) scholarly areas and materials can be explored and taught (Nicol 2019). Influences have become common through political pressure from local, state, and federal sources, and private individuals tied to them. Those influences seem to be growing. On just one topic, critical race theory and related diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, state legislatures are in growing numbers advancing and passing restrictive laws concerning both curriculum matters and related cocurricular campus initiatives and programs. In fact, states doing so have become so common that the Chronicle of Higher Education has a running “tracker” feature currently citing such legislation in 32 states.

Perhaps a larger concern is for the educational and scholarly expertise of faculty and the leadership of their institutions, being replaced by the passing whims of political and legislative influencers. Ironically, that type of intervention is what has held back higher education in many competing foreign countries, while the protection of academic freedom in our own county is credited as the basis for the world-class success of American higher education endeavors.

On a different but not unrelated front, the past few decades have seen a dramatic increase in attention to and a broadening definition of faculty “shared governance” (Barao 2023). The concept of shared governance was born from the notion of academic freedom in scholarly activities (teaching, research, and

[1] Who are generally unfamiliar with how it works and why the results justify the process.

service), but has spread to most if not virtually all aspects related to the operation of universities. Many faculty have come to define shared governance not as simply sharing a voice in most aspects of operating a university, but their voice bringing with it an obligation to honor their observations and positions. In many circumstances, that expectation has led to an uncomfortable if not combative relation between faculty, their leaders, and administrators. However, it is the administrators who are otherwise generally perceived if not formally charged with the responsibility for university operational concerns by the university oversight boards to which they report.

Campus Autonomy and Oversight

Reflecting the origins and history of U.S. higher education, from its inception until as recently as a half century ago, universities, their leaders, and their faculty, were widely respected and held privileged positions in society. They were generally recognized as some of the country's not just most educated but most thoughtful societal leaders. University presidents and their faculty were commonly sought out for observations and advice on the most complex and vexing questions of the day.

Most campus leaders also enjoyed considerable liberty in developing and executing institution direction. As a result, they were able to and were recognized for developing the country's higher education excellence with, over time, an efficiency and pace surpassing universities in other countries with far longer higher education histories and opportunities for success. However, support and oversight of universities was nonetheless recognized as called for, but for two very different reasons.

In the private sector, oversight boards were established for individual universities. They were relatively large, and made up of strong supporters both of the institution and its institutional leaders. Board members were most commonly chosen because as captains of industry they were experienced with large, complex organizations and understood the fiduciary versus operational boundary between oversight boards and operational leadership. More specifically they were also typically chosen because of their capacity to personally advance their university's success.

That institutional success was the overarching goal of board members. Because they were overseeing private institutions, such boards were also generally freed of political intervention, and enjoyed a lack of scrutiny from critical media and other public sector sources.

Conversely, oversight boards in the public higher education sector were generally created to oversee a "system" of public state institutions. Beyond obvious fiduciary responsibilities, public sector higher education oversight boards were often if not commonly established as a buffer from intervention in campus

operations by external corporate and political interests. In fact, many were established in the late 1800s through early 1900s *specifically* because of that very type of manipulative external intervention.

While such public systems were commonly made up of one or two larger institutions of relatively substantial gravitas (typically the precursors to research universities), they also included smaller regional institutions of more limited scope and capacities. In stark contrast to private sector oversight boards, the loyalty and priority of public sector boards was often to their *system* of institutions. In many senses the size, scope and best interests of individual institutions was secondary.

That said, the responsibilities of public higher education boards were and to this day remain in tension between their system's larger universities (which in terms of enrollment and economic impact, not infrequently exceed the collective sum of the system's other campuses), and yet providing support of their system's smaller regional institutions. Further complicating the role of such boards, smaller institutions - as part of a university system - commonly enjoyed sharing identification as a "university," when in fact their size and scope was largely, if not wholly, out of sync with university status. Nonetheless, the constituencies of those smaller regional institutions tended to enjoy them being framed in such terms, and collectively often represented a political concern of substantial implications for system oversight boards.

For both private and public institutions, the original role of their oversight boards has steadily and dramatically changed over the past half century. While they have evolved along different paths, they have perhaps done so for many common reasons.

In the private sector, while the basis and selection of membership in oversight boards has remained relatively consistent, private institutions have in contemporary times been drawn in to the public arena. As highlighted in above sections, even if they are symbolically or literally our nation's "Ivy" institutions, student behavior and institutional leadership's responses have become the fodder for external evaluation and criticism. As a result, and perhaps reflecting not just the makeup of their boards, but their waning deference to institutional leadership, private universities are coming under increasing scrutiny. Although high-profile institutions and their leadership draw the majority of national attention, even the smallest private institutions are experiencing a tide change in the role and involvement of oversight boards, or at least some of the more aggressive members of such boards.

In the public sector, the tensions previously highlighted in term of overseeing a system of varying and at times competing institutions often becomes palpable. Also, because of their public nature, external scrutiny and criticism of public universities is increasingly being passed on through if not created by their oversight boards, and individual members thereof.

The appropriateness of public sector oversight board actions also requires asking a challenging question. Should the board make decisions in the best interests of the larger and more impactful institutions and their superior contributions to state interests, or in the best interests of not leaving behind the smaller or more challenged institutions and their regional constituencies?

Further complicating evaluation, public oversight board members are not (and purportedly 'cannot be') chosen for their allegiance to any given institution. Nor do they necessarily have substantial political affiliation or financial gravitas in advancing state higher education. Rather, they are ostensibly chosen (either through gubernatorial, legislative or elective processes, or some combination of the three) because of their general representativeness of the state's constituencies. It is often clear, however, that those named to public higher education oversight boards come with preexisting affiliations and agendas (Scott 2019).

At the end of the day, in summative terms, such public boards either by intent or benign acceptance, have in themselves often become politicized, although not legitimately established, as branches of government (or political parties). In doing so, they often work feverously to accept and try to accommodate the very external influences and interventions in higher education which many were created to buffer against.

Real versus Perceived Return on Investment in Higher Education

The sea change in perceptions of higher education as what economists term a "public good," to perception of it as a "private good," may be one of the most provocative turns in the story of U.S. higher education. In the late 1600s, as highlighted previously, higher education served as a powerful social sorting mechanism for positioning elite young men for public leadership roles. To enter and advance in such roles, it was virtually obligatory to have a collegiate preparation. However, as the country grew and expanded, post-secondary preparation instead became reflective of the educational achievement and acumen required for advancing the *economic* interests of the country.

To fully take advantage of the increasingly recognize natural resource potentials of the growing country, astute federal leaders of the time came to recognized that access to higher education could not remain limited to individuals of privilege. Those leaders recognized that increasing access to higher education was a linchpin to unleashing and increasing the economic prosperity that all Americans would benefit from. They were ultimately successful in building public enthusiasm for doing so.

Although a number of states had much earlier established public universities reflecting the above, the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 codified a national agenda of mass access to public higher education. While focused on the agricultural and mechanical arts (engineering) required for the expansion and

economic exploitation of western territories, the act was arguably the single most important point in the story of how the United States would become an economic world power in less than the subsequent century. Public universities, and public university systems, would in the process proliferate in every state in the nation.

The second higher education inflection point would come with the end of World War II, when an estimated 12-14 million soldiers (the vast majority of which were male) were returning from the war. Complicating that reintroduction of so many, were workforce changes the war had brought. Those factors created a substantial impetus for further broadening access to higher education. Simply put, the role of new industrial technologies and women in society, and particularly workforce demands, had changed dramatically during the war. The overnight flood of men returning from the war and seeking employment created both a problem and an incredible economic opportunity.

If returning veterans were turned toward higher education as a buffering mechanism for their reintroduction to society, doing so suggested the potential for unimaginable national prosperity. Through utilization of a national "G.I Bill," a college education became not just accessible but virtually free. That experiment in a sweeping public investment in higher education, and the resulting return on investment (ROI) realized by it, were proven in the repositioning of the U.S. not just as one of the world's economic powers, but arguably *the* world power.

The above period, commonly referred to as this country's "Golden Age of Higher Education" became the impetus for an investment in higher education never before seen anywhere in the world. Virtually all states accelerated investment in higher education in what became a race to take advantage of the ROI that had been realized by doing so at the federal level. That burgeoning breadth of post-secondary institutions also represented a transition nationally, from mass toward universal access to higher education (Trow 1970).

In the following decades, however, public memory of the problem and subsequent solution provided by higher education access increasingly waned. Both federal and state support for higher education would slowly but steadily decrease in deference to new and emerging social priorities such as K-12 education, and health and welfare concerns. Although the public appetite and demand for higher education continued, decreases in public funding of it, at both state and federal levels, created the need for previous funding to be replaced by private (students') investment in their education. With that private investment would come a mindset that it was individual graduates who benefited from higher education rather than society at large. That emerging perception of higher education as a "private good," further fueled the reciprocal withdrawal of public funding.

Within the half century following World War II, higher education would go from a vaulted status of national priority and public good to a priority and benefit more and more perceived as shifted to individuals. As that took place,

individuals' price paid for higher education escalated. To be clear, economically speaking, what was happening was not a change in the cost of higher education (beyond inflation), but simply who was paying for it.

The price to individuals interested in higher education was indeed escalating. Somewhat ironically compounding the situation, was a call for further access to higher education from a wide range of those who previously had had little if any practical access to it. Those under-represented populations would often if not typically bring with them very different educational preparation, and capacity to pay, than previous "traditional" college students. The costs of addressing the issues of broadening access added to the already escalating price tag of a higher education experience.

Collectively, the above factors led to an increasingly cynical evaluation of the quality of a higher education experience. That cynicism was undoubtedly escalated by the high albeit perhaps understandable drop-out rates of those pursuing it (driven in no small part by the increasing differences of entering student preparation). Additionally, whether a student was successful or not at completing their college education, were doubts of doing so being "worth it' versus options that could be completed in a more timely and affordable manner.

It is important to note that the economic evidence for the advantages of completing a college education have remained rather substantially in favor of it (Muller 2024; Leslie & Brinkman 1993). Reciprocally, though, pursuing but not completing a traditional college education can in fact have devasting economic implications for individuals who drop out.

In the final analysis, "perception is reality" for many in the public, and the less expensive, faster, and more sure outcomes of vocational training have become increasingly attractive. The realities of high drop-out rates and associated unrecoverable costs (compounded by lost income while in college), fuel a compelling narrative around a college degree not being worth the risks of time, effort and expense.

The personal and public value of higher education remains hotly debated, and is fueled by media provocation and an emerging positive public sentiment toward vocational careers and their relatively low cost of entry and more immediate ROI. In light of those changes in public opinion, many state and federal legislators have become wary of public investment in traditional higher education systems they have come to perceive as greedy, wasteful, and a poor public investment, especially in contrast to the vocational career alternatives discussed above.

Changing the narrative around the value of higher education, and indeed the aspects of that narrative which have merit, is and continues to be one of the most vexing challenges facing higher education. Pundits might well argue that a failure to successfully do so will ultimately retract access to and completion of a

college education to only those from privileged backgrounds with the economic resources to pursue it. The irony of that scenario, in both ethical terms and social best interests, is troubling to say the least.

Declining Enrollments

In spite of the issues discussed in the above section, up until the past decade, most higher education institutions had managed to maintain and even grow enrollments. Doing so relied not just on maintaining traditional student interest, but increasingly finding the means to attract and support matriculation (albeit with as yet unsure levels of degree completion) by non-traditional populations which had previously been under-represented.

One of the mechanisms for maintaining if not growing enrollments was the growth and maturation of "distance education" (online) tools made possible through quickly improving information technologies (IT). Although the educational efficacy of those mechanisms remains a matter of substantial debate in higher education circles, it is inarguable that IT's online options allow students considerably more flexibility in how, when, and where they pursue coursework. The ability to do so at one's convenience makes the mechanism particularly attractive to many students, particularly non-traditional individuals who may have no choice but to balance their higher education interests with work, family, and other competing demands.

Online options are also very attractive to host institutions which can now, virtually "overnight," recruit and matriculate students on literally a world-wide basis, with little need to provide additional campus physical infrastructure and support to accommodate them. Doing so also allows public universities to maintain if not grow enrollment numbers that are the basis of state operational funding of higher education, and state student financial aid. For both public and private institutions, growing enrollments also increase tuition revenues and federal grant student financial aid.

The unanticipated world-wide COVID-19 pandemic served to further and substantially disrupt an already dynamic enrollment environment. A combination of the inability of students to pursue higher education in a traditional residential manner, the previously discussed criticisms for the cost and value of traditional higher education, and the escalating interest in online options, created a "gap" in traditional enrollment patterns.

Research by the National Institutes of Health (Aucejo, French, Ugalde & Zafer 2020) suggested that 13% of students delayed graduation, 40% lost a job, internship or offer, and 29% expected to earn less at 35. Additionally, lower-income students were 55% more likely than their higher-income peers to have delayed graduation due to COVID-19. Similar findings by the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (Di & Caldwell 2022) suggest steeply declining college

enrollments (-8.7 percent nationally between fall 2020 and fall 2021 alone). Various other studies suggested that many students were taking fewer classes, pursuing different enrollment formats or at different institutions, or pursuing different kinds of certificates or degrees. Simply put, as a result of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, student enrollment patterns have been dramatically impacted in a variety of ways with as yet unknown consequences.

Many institutions, particularly larger universities with more operational options for surviving enrollment challenges, are in the process of reestablish enrollment pipelines. They are often doing so through some combination of traditional and online options, and other emerging mechanisms such as dual-enrollment (high school students enrolling in college level courses, generally through online access).

Historically, the closure of colleges and universities in the U.S. had been an infrequent occurrence. However, due to the recent and substantial drops in enrollments, closures of colleges and universities are increasingly common (Donadel 2024; Zalaznick 2024). Most at risk to date have been small private institutions. A Brookings Institute report confirms that point, stating that "In 2018 23 colleges closed compared to 32 in 2020 and 99 in 2023" (Startz 2024). Small colleges tend to be heavily reliant on enrollments unless they have the capacity, through their endowments, to either attract new students through "tuition discounting" or simply weather the storm through outright subsidization of their operations. Neither option, though, is a sustainable financial model, as evidenced by the increasing number of college closures being realized in that sector of U.S. higher education.

Athletics and Athletes

Increasingly over the past few decades, one of the most commonly debated priorities in contemporary U.S. higher education has been the appropriateness, cost, and sustainability of athletic programs, and the implications of participation for the involved student athletes. The matter is commonly but misleadingly viewed through only the narrow lenses of football, men's basketball, and to a growing extent women's basketball, in what historically have been the five leagues[2] making up the top tier of the much broader National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Division-I category.

Doing so is misleading for a number of reasons, including the unique and substantially different competitive and financial aspects of those top-tier programs, and that the vast majority of the combined roughly 500,000 student athletes in this country compete in the remainder of Division-I, the lower NCAA Divisions II and III, as well as the NCAA-independent National Association of Intercollegiate

[2] Through recent reorganization now four.

Athletics (NAIA). Those lower levels reflect few if any of the issues under fire with the relatively small group of top-tier football and basketball programs highlighted above.

The history of athletics in American higher education is one dating back to the first colonial colleges. "Athletics" was originally organized by and as student activities (sports clubs) little resembling intercollegiate sports as we know them today. Such student activities were soon after institutionalized, though, as an attempt to control student behavior. Involved sports had become increasingly violent and ungentlemanly, thus counter to what a college education was supposed to represent.

As they nonetheless grew in popularity, athletics became valued as a powerful competitive prestige mechanism between, at the time, what would become known today as the "Ivy League" universities. Most if not all such institutions were struggling to establish themselves as premiere above competitors, but unbiased contrasting of their academic merits was challenging. Competition in early university-sponsored sports provided a visible and attractive mechanism of comparison, and notably, one that would draw public attention, viewing, and funding by increasingly large numbers of followers ("fans;" derived from "fanatics"). Provocatively, one of the early most popular (and international) examples of the above was rowing (today's "crew"), although a number of other sports would establish themselves. Most notably and rising above the others was what would become modern day American football.

By the late 1800 and early 1900s, higher education athletics had diversified and differentiated between what would become the major top tier athletic programs with requisite demands for institutional, private, and fan support versus far more modest programs reflecting their humble beginnings as student activities and sports clubs. Regardless of their format, from major top tier programs through relatively more modest mid- and small-school models, higher education athletics would have by the mid-1900s grown in to what was considered and arguably was indeed an indispensable aspect of collegiate culture, and the visibility, attractiveness, and reputation of individual campuses. In the past two decades, however, issues around higher education athletics have manifest themselves in dramatically new and different ways. Public concerns have generally formed around three points of criticism.

First is the appropriateness and effectiveness of the NCAA's oversight responsibility for rule-making, rule compliance, and treatment of athletes (Forde 2024). Most often, said criticisms are largely related to only the previously discussed three sports in the top-tier of Division-I. Nonetheless, those concerns are often cast as representative of the entire collegiate athletic enterprise.

The second point of criticism has become the ever-increasing financial and facilities demands required from host institutions who aspire to remain competitive

at *any* NCAA level, but more so those in the Division-I , and particularly if not obligatory of those in the top-tier of Division-I. Program size, expenses, and facilities argued as required to be competitive in top-tier participation in football, men's basketball, and women's basketball have grown in to juggernauts feeding visibility, marketing, and revenue generation as never before imagined. Because of what has become the size and scope of those top tier athletics programs, is the perception if not legitimate concern of them having exceeded universities and the NCAA's capacities to manage and control them (Jenkins 2024). Although the challenges of top-tier competitiveness are dramatically reduced at lower competitive levels, they nonetheless do surface there as well. However, universities (at any level) which have tried stepping back from expectations to grow their investment in athletics are rare, often lead to a change in university leadership, and generally tend to get reversed.

Third is the emerging perception if not reality that the involved student athletes (again, generated primarily by the three sports in the top tier of Division-I), having become tools in something they received little if no benefit from (Desal 2019). There are viable arguments for and against both the factual nature of that perception, and if true, whether there *should* be a shift from the historic American collegiate model of amateur athletics to one of an open and professionalized business model. Doing so may evolve in to athletes being defined as employees, and as a result, fully dismissing student-athlete amateurism in favor of professionalism. That redefinition would allow athletes to personally share in financial rewards that are part of a competitive business marketplace, and change their relationship with their university to one of employer and employee.

Doing so would also bring with it a generally ignored but ominous potential implication for the loss of tax-exempt status which [non-profit] colleges and universities have had since their inception and still currently enjoy. A shift in their tax status, triggered by athletics, would have cost implications which few if any campuses could financially accommodate.

For better or worse, few topics singularly take more time and priority of university leaders or draw as much public attention, discussion, and debate - in and outside of higher education - as college athletics. Institutional leaders also appreciate that a failure to succeed, even in the swirling and ill-defined environments surrounding athletics, can have devasting institutional and personal consequence. The extraordinary ethical and legal complications of the topic, and absence of clear solutions, has become an unattractive distraction for those involved both at the university level, and those external to its successful management. Informed or not, critics would argue that higher education has failed to successfully manage athletics and athlete issues, and have ample examples they can point to (Jenkins 2024; Ford 2024).

A more thorough discussion of higher education athletics at the most competitive levels is not viable in this setting. However, highlighting it is obligatory both in its own relatively unique right, but also because of the public attention it draws. It is also necessary in terms of discussing, as previously mentioned, that the majority of student athletes in the rest of Division-I and the other tiers of higher education athletics, are not part of that environment and for the most part do not aspire to it. For those student athletes, participation in athletics is more often than not simply an enjoyable form of physically and mentally testing themselves in athletic competition with their peers at other universities, and in many circumstances athletes around the world.

The above arguments aside, for host institutions it can also not be overlooked that athletics represents a highly valued and effective means of recruiting and enrolling students who desire to continue athletic involvement beyond high school. Somewhat counterintuitively, a burgeoning number of college sports (including “e-sports” that are not traditional forms of athletics) are emerging at low-enrollment universities. Athletics in such settings may be the sole means for a small university to differentiate itself in a market responsive manner that will result in increased enrollments. It also allows small universities to do so without substantial staffing, facilities, or scholarship expenses, as students make their university application based simply on an opportunity to continue “playing” sports past the secondary level. A failure to recognize and seize on the enrollment opportunities made possible by athletics, in the increasingly competitive and demanding enrollment environment discussed here in a previous section, can pose a particularly dangerous misstep for small universities.

Conclusion

The above discussions of the foundational bricks undergirding U.S. higher education, and that those bricks have been loosened if not removed, increasingly calls in to question if or when the current structure of higher education will collapse. In fairness, some pundits might well suggest that higher education *should* collapse, and each of the topics discussed has, by higher education’s mishandling, led to that being the case. Indeed, given the breadth and depths of the issues offered in this discussion, many may predict – and be justified doing so - that such a collapse is inevitable.

That said, it is worthwhile to consider further context. If singularly focusing on the history and current state of higher education in this country, it is easy to forget that the U.S. model is a mere infant in terms of its longevity versus many European and Asian universities. Yet at the same time U.S. higher education has arguably out-performed most if not all such points of comparison. In fact, U.S. higher education may simply be facing issues and threats that overseas peer

universities have faced and moved on from during their own far more extensive pasts.

An alternative and potentially more interesting question may involve why U.S. higher education, once held in extraordinarily high regard both here and abroad, and so closely tied to the economic success and viability of our country, has become so easily dismissed as costly, ineffective, out of control, and irrelevant. A potential explanation may be tied to the larger dismissal of scientifically derived evidence in deference to provocative, quickly arrived at, placating opinions which are currently in vogue. Those opinions are generally offered without substantiation or informed debate, in an increasingly if not unavoidably polarized environment that further feeds their dissemination. That concern seems applicable to each of the 'bricks' discussed above.

The reality is, however, that U.S. higher education in general and the research and teaching that takes place therein, remain of world-class caliber if not superior in most comparisons. That is because of its unique qualities, which viewed without context, irresistibly albeit ironically draw criticism. And in fact, the economic value of higher education, as both a private *and* public good, remains difficult for informed study to dismiss. That is not to say that U.S. higher education does not need to look at addressing many concerns, but it does suggest that external constituencies may be well served to look at their and other's criticisms, consider the motivations behind those criticisms, and be warry of the potential implications of critics' actions.

References

Aucejo. E.; French, J.; Ugalde Aray, M. & Zafer, B. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on student experiences and expectations: Evidence from a survey. *National Institutes of Health, National Library of Medicine, and the Bureau of Economic Research.*

Barao, J. (2023). What is shared governance in higher education. *Azeus Convene*.

Bresciani, D. (1996). Explanation of administrative costs. *The University of Arizona*. UMI Dissertation Services.

Bowen, H. R (1980). What determines the cost of higher education? In H. R. Bowen (Ed.). *The cost of higher education.* Carnegie Foundation for the advancement of Teaching.

Desal, E. (2019). Survey shows student athletes feel taken advantage of by the NCAA. *College Pulse.*

Di, W. & Caldwell, M. (2022). Students cut college during pandemic; their return is uncertain. *Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas*.

Donadel, A. (2024). College closures are surging. Can institutions pause the plummet? *University Business.*

Forde, P. (2024). Everyone is to blame for slowly killing college sports. *Sport Illustrated*.

Gardner, W. (2024). Why would anybody want to be a college president? *James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal.*
Jenkins, S. (2024). The problem with college sports isn't the athletes: It's the schools. *Washington Post*.
Jesse, D. (2023). Portrait of the presidential leader: College presidents are less experienced than ever. *Chronicle of Higher Education*.
Leslie, L. & Brinkman, P. (1993). *The economic value of higher education*. Macmillan Publishing; NY.
Melguizo, T. & Strober, M. H. (2007). Faculty salaries and maximization of prestige. *Research in Higher Education.*
Moody, J. (2023). Why are so many college presidents resigning? *Inside Higher Education.*
Muller, C. (2024). The evolving value of higher education. *Forbes*.
Nichol, G. (2019). Political interference with academic freedom and free speech at public universities. *Academe.*
Nietzel, M. T. (2024). U.S. dominates global rankings. *Forbes*.
Novak, R. (2023). The decline of public confidence and the rise of interference in higher education. *Association of Governing Boards (AGB)*.
Scott, R. A. (2019). Unprepared trustees: A critical problem in higher education. *Academe*.
Seltzer, R. (2012). Making a modern president. *Inside Higher Education*.
Simama, J. (2024). Political interference and the future of higher education. *Governing.com*
Startz, D. (2024). Are colleges really facing an enrollment cliff? *Brookings Institution*. Washington, D.C.
Thorp, H. (2024). Where does the college presidency go from here? *Chronicle of Higher Education*.
Trow, M. (1970). Reflections on the Transition from Mass to Universal Higher Education. *MIT Press* on behalf of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.
U. S. News (2025). 2024-2025 Best Global Universities. *U.S. News*.
Times Higher Education Global Rankings (2024). *Times Higher Education*.
Wippman, D. & Altschuler, G. C. (2022). Political interference in higher education is becoming endemic. *Inside Higher Education*.
Zackel, J. (2022). Riding the wave of college presidential turnover. *HED Jobs.com*.
Zalaznick, M. (2024). This is the big risk lurking behind recent college closures. *University Business.*

Dean Bresciani's *research and teaching interests center around the financing, organizational behavior, and politics of higher education. He has written and presented extensively on those topics, and has been a member and held leadership positions in a wide range of higher education professional associations including APLU, NACUBO, and the NCAA. Since stepping down after 12 years at the president of North Dakota State University, Bresciani has*

served as a professor in the School of Education there. Prior to NDSU, he held senior administrative and faculty positions at Texas A&M University, and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

Priorities and Metrics

Leann Wolff
Greate Outcomes Consulting
Associate Director, Northern Plains Ethics Institute

Abstract

Organizations often undermine their own success through poorly designed performance systems. Common pitfalls include confusing labels for basic processes, an overload of metrics that no one monitors, objectives that claim measurability but lack clarity, goals that are merely project steps, and metrics disconnected from financial transparency. Of these, the absence of financial openness is most damaging. Many senior managers hesitate to share financial data, fearing misunderstanding, breaches of confidentiality, or unnecessary worry among employees.

However, as Jack Stack emphasizes in The Great Game of Business, transparency fosters engagement and better decision-making. Employees can learn basic financial concepts just as they understand sports statistics, and trust builds when leaders treat staff as capable partners. With financial insight, individuals see how their work impacts revenue and costs, increasing accountability and creativity—especially during challenging times. Concealing financial realities breeds misinformation and disengagement, while openness empowers teams to contribute meaningfully. Stack's approach—logical, inclusive, and fun—demonstrates that informed employees become invested in organizational success. Ultimately, financial literacy is the foundation for incentive systems that give everyone a stake in outcomes, provided organizations avoid the common missteps outlined above.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Performance Metrics, Organizational Objectives, The Great Game of Business

Priorities and Metrics: Why getting them right matters (Part 1)

I have a number of pet peeves under this heading.

1. Goofy labels for routine, basic things
2. So many metrics that no one pays attention.
3. Objectives or priorities that are supposed to be measurable but aren't.
4. Goals that are actually steps in a project plan.
5. Metrics without financial transparency.

To give credit where it is due, I love *The Great Game of Business* by Jack Stack. His approach is logical, inclusive, transparent, and focused on building teams made up of good business people. And they know how to have fun in their work. Stack's book succinctly confirmed what I learned from strong managers and leaders in my early career.

Let's start with #5. Senior managers often hesitate to share the core financials with their teams. Initially, they are concerned about whether the average worker will understand what the financials mean. They are sometimes apprehensive that confidential information will be shared inappropriately in the community. Other times they are concerned that the information will be a distraction: the average worker doesn't need to know the financial health of the company. When an organization is struggling, the managers may be uneasy about worrying their teams. I have heard all of these reasons from clients. Let's look at each one.

They are right that the average worker may need some guidance to understand the financials. The "average" worker quickly learns basic accounting concepts. As Jack Stack has pointed out, if the average avid sports fans can understand complicated stats, they can understand an income statement, cash flow and balance sheet. You aren't teaching them to be accountants; you are teaching them to understand the stats of the game that is your business and industry.

As for confidentiality, your team already has access to confidential information that makes a big difference to your organization's success. If they aren't disclosing that information willy-nilly around the community, what makes you think they will share the financial information? Besides, don't you trust the people who work for you?

The "need to know" argument implies that an organization hires people who cannot understand and apply information to the decisions they make. Decisions that the average employee makes every day can make a difference in the

success of the company, if they are given the chance to learn and see how their work contributes to the success of their organization. Knowing the company's financial status heightens the average worker's awareness that what they do matters; when they know their work matters *and how it matters*, they become more engaged in their work and they make better decisions about their work.

Some executives may think that delineating their colleagues into "need to know" vs. "just do your job" groups is simply arrogant and disrespectful to the individuals who work with them. Consider the role of janitor. Why would they need to know how their company is doing? What impact can they have the work of the business? You never know. Jack Stack tells the story of a janitor at the plant stopping him as he walked through the factory to ask whether he noticed that 75% of their business came from one customer and whether he thought that might be a risk to the company. Heads down, focused on the work, the executives hadn't noticed…yet. That one comment by the ***janitor*** raised a flag for the company and they intentionally began working on increasing the diversity of their customer base. Only a short time later, their largest customer cut back. It hurt but not as much as if they hadn't brought in new clients. The moral of the story is don't make assumptions about what individuals in the company can contribute. If you invest your trust in your team, they will invest themselves back into the organization.

The final justification - "I don't want to worry my team" - is paternalistic and lacking awareness. If the organization is struggling, the team already knows. In fact, they may be creating a story in their heads that the organization is in worse shape than it really is. The stress of many managers whose organizations are struggling is visible and obvious to most of their colleagues. When times are tough is the ***worst*** time to avoid sharing financial information; in other words, when are times are tough is the ***right*** time to share financial information. You need every ounce of awareness, creativity, and improved decision-making of every individual to help you turn around a struggling organization.

Basically, you have to remember that you aren't hiring stupid people. You have smart people who have the capacity to learn and understand basic financial information. As they learn the basic financial information, they are also learning how their work helps grow the revenue and limits the expenses…or not.

Jack Stack recommends giving people a stake in the outcome; that is the success of the business. The financial knowledge is the first step to creating an incentive plan that gives folks a stake in the success of the organization. Pet peeves #1-4 get can derail a well-intentioned incentive plan, even one based on the company's financials. Those pet peeves are explored in Part 2.

Priorities and Metrics: Why getting them right matters (Part 2)

As I wrote in the last segment, I have a number of pet peeves under this heading.

1. Goofy labels for routine things
2. So many metrics that no one pays attention.
3. Objectives or priorities that are supposed to be measurable but aren't.
4. Goals that are actually steps in a project plan.
5. Metrics without financial transparency.

The subject of Part 1 was about financial transparency. Your work force needs to understand the financials of the business because the metrics create *a line of sight* from their work to the financials. This line of sight is critical to identifying good metrics for individual teams to assess their work. Knowing that line of sight is why labels, priorities and the "right" metrics are important.

Goofy labels are a distraction.

They don't make the work "fun". The goal for all communication is clarity and conciseness. And some precision helps as well. If you have to tell a story to explain what a label means, change the label.

Too many metrics are also distracting.

Whatever your industry and business, you will have loads of stats to monitor. It is absolutely true that an organization needs to "measure what matters", as stated by many business books. The problem is that not every metric that you track will help your team move the lever that moves the metrics that determine ***every*** organization's success: net profit[1] and cash flow.

Finding the metrics that matter most – the levers that move the result on the financial statements – usually doesn't take that much time to identify. There just aren't that many that drive net profit and cash flow directly. Those two or three

[1] Non-profit organizations don't have "profit" per se, but they do need to be sustainable. In other words, their revenues – from donations, grants, fees, etc. – must exceed their expenses. As Scott Holdman, a local nonprofit business consultant, has often told his clients: "No money, no mission." It may not be precisely described as net profit but the math is similar.

metrics – AND NO MORE[2] – are the starting point for levers/metrics in the departments or divisions around the organization.

If you are an executive in a larger organization, you are likely to say that it just isn't possible. You are wrong. It may be more challenging, but it isn't impossible. It is vital that you focus in on the core metrics or your hundreds or even thousands of employees will not have a clear sense of what success looks like. Net profit and two other metrics are all you need.

Consider that Paul O'Neill transformed ALCOA by focusing on safety. Wall Street analysts thought he had lost his mind; the stock price was dropping, so obviously his focus *should have been* on shoring that up. His emphasis on safety ushered in a transformation that benefitted the workers and shareholders, far better than the current executives in the company have been doing since his departure after more or less abandoning his successful structures[3].

Once you have the core metrics for the organization, your teams have what they need to begin identifying *their levers* to move those metrics. Which brings me to #3 and #4.

Objectives need to be measurable.

Objectives and goals are not tasks in a project plan.

They are the foundation on which a project plan is built. The project plan is replete with the many actions that will move the levers that are measurable, as identified in the objective. A metric is not whether you accomplished a particular task or set of tasks. We all have important tasks that need to be done to keep our organizations running smoothly. The question is: Are we doing the work that keeps our organization in business?

---

[2] There are three reasons to keep it at two or three metrics. First, these are the lagging indicators on which you want tight focus. Second, each team will have lagging indicators that they will use to drive change with the core metrics of the organization, which brings each team to have two or three organization-wide shared metrics and another two metrics for their team or department. Third, there is a "cliff" of awareness or focus – too many metrics push people to lose focus – and focus is the point.

[3] You can go to any number of resources to learn about Paul O'Neill and ALCOA's performance. Looking only a share price, which is one of the most over-valued metrics of a publicly traded company, here is a link to verify the performance: https://www.marketwatch.com/investing/stock/aa

Every department or division in a company needs to know what their *line-of-sight* metrics are to net profitability and the core metrics of success.

Someone reading this might think that the workers become "widgets" and "order takers" with all this focus on levers and metrics. The exact opposite is true, BECAUSE you started with financial transparency and a stake in the outcome. You can't hide bad decisions when you have financial transparency. People are more engaged when they are given both information and the accountability to help serve customers and improve the profitability of *their* company, even if they are only stakeholders and not shareholders in the company.

Priorities and Metrics: Why getting them right matters (Part 3)

Does this approach to financial transparency, education and sound metrics work? That is the real question.

About five months ago, I met with Josh Hutchins, owner and manager of Two Men and a Truck in Fargo, ND. The industry has narrow profit-margins, which heightens the need – and the tension – to focus on key metrics. We had a great conversation over the course of two hours, during which I recommended *The Great Game of Business* to him. We connected again three months later when Josh wanted my help finalizing the 2025 bonus plan for his company.

Josh had read Jack Stack's book *three* times in those three months. With the help of the book and his own business acumen, he had developed a good bonus plan that would pay his team quarterly based on their success. I helped tweak a few things: using the same three metrics across the teams and payout planning (less in the first two quarters, more in the third and the balance in the fourth quarter).

We also talked about the importance of the weekly huddles. The one week look back of what happened and the four weeks look ahead with the most focus on the current and next week.

When we reconnected about a month later, Josh said he felt a bit disappointed because the team didn't seem very engaged in the huddles – he was still doing the bulk of the talking. I suggested that whenever a manager brings in something new, it takes time to get folks to understand the process. And often the process needs both repetition and some adjustment. I also encouraged him to have people from each of the teams bring *their* numbers to the huddle and do the reports in person.

How are they doing six weeks into the new year? Amazing. Josh shared a few outcomes that demonstrate the value of metrics, giving people a stake in the outcome and open communication.

1. The team raises the questions about when the numbers are not what was expected.
2. They aren't blaming; they are asking *each other*: What happened? What can we do about it?
3. He isn't getting frustrated or angry about when things are missed. The team sees and is catching the issues themselves.
4. The first quarter in their business tends to run at a loss – it is just the cycle of this business just as it is the cycle of other businesses affected by weather in the upper Midwest. Interestingly, they had their best January *ever* and ran a *profit*; small as it was, it was better than a loss, obviously.
5. The team is working together better.

Happier employees, happy customers, happier owners. We all win when we all win.

Leann Wolff *founded Great Outcomes Consulting with Mike Slette in 2010.After Mike's retirement, Leann was joined by Rebecca Amundsen. Having experienced first-hand the difference between a job and great work, Leann and Rebecca are passionate helping clients achieve better results by balancing purpose and people with profitability. Whether it's clarifying what a business is really all about, establishing a vision for the future or creating a growth plan that engages employees and satisfies customers, Great Outcomes Consulting helps their clients achieve business success—and in way that builds their competitive advantage for the long-term. By taking a personalized approach to every interaction with clients, Leann and Rebecca tailor services to the unique needs of each organization. The focus is to ensure that each person connects with the business in a powerful, meaningful way.*

Leann graduated from Concordia College, in Moorhead, MN, and earned a Master of Arts degree from the University of St. Thomas, in St. Paul, MN. Leann has spent more than 20 years working with some of today's best-known companies and gathering proven, best practices from highly successful individuals. Throughout her career, she has built many high-functioning teams and facilitated hundreds of trainings, brainstorming, and decision-making sessions with teams ranging in size from three to 100.

Winter 2025

Student Section

An Analysis of Public and Waldorf School Systems: The Influence of Colonialism

McKenna Faith Zaleski Crance
Class of 2028, Macalester College

Abstract

Bell Hooks critiques the historical association of theory with academic elitism, arguing that this has marginalized non-white women and reinforced colonial systems of power. To counter this, she advocates for feminist and decolonial theories rooted in lived experience and community dialogue rather than confined to academic spaces.

This paper explores three key questions: the historical relationship between decoloniality and feminist theory; strategies for introducing these concepts earlier in education, such as K–12; and how public education has manipulated colonial narratives to obscure decolonial thought. Drawing on Aníbal Quijano's concept of the "Coloniality of Power" and Maria Lugones' critique of its gendered dimensions, I examine how Eurocentric hierarchies commodified both non-white women and nature, shaping modern education systems. Through personal experiences in public schooling and Waldorf education, I analyze how competitive, individualistic models perpetuate coloniality, while Waldorf's emphasis on community, gender-neutral practices, and ecological values reflects decolonial resistance. Ultimately, I argue that education functions as a colonial space, and that alternative pedagogies like Waldorf offer pathways toward dismantling Eurocentric norms and fostering inclusive, community-based learning.

Keywords: Decoloniality, Coloniality of Power, Feminist Theory, Education Systems, Waldorf Education

Bell Hooks argues that theory has historically been associated with academia and elitism, marginalizing non-white women and perpetuating colonial systems of power. To challenge this, she proposes that decolonial and feminist theories should be grounded in lived experiences and community communication, rather than confined to academic spaces. In this vein, I pose three questions: What

is the historical tie between decoloniality and feminist theory? How could these concepts be implemented earlier in academia, like K-12 education, to create accessibility? And how has the public education system already manipulated the history of coloniality to hide decoloniality? Decoloniality refers to the thought/effort of recognizing and dismantling Eurocentric knowledge and hierarchies. In the context of child education, decoloniality must focus on the commodification and sexualization that is paralleled between non-white women and Nature/Territory/Earth in Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies.

To support this claim, I will compare two experiences: one based on the sexualization of children's bodies through swimwear, and the other on the individualist, competitive, and commodified nature of education in my public school education. In contrast, I will examine two experiences from my Waldorf education: one focused on ignoring gender structures, and the other on community-based values and learning. I argue that education has become a colonial space, and further assert that Waldorf education is engaging with decolonial forms of resistance or a decolonial project; in teaching the value of community, nature, and leveling the gender power structure. I will first explore the concept of Coloniality of Power, focusing on its intersectionality between race, gender, and labor. I will then outline the historical relationship between: (1) non-white women and sexual oppression; (2) non-white women and the Earth; (3) non-white women and commodification; and (4) the Earth and exploitation/commodification in terms of coloniality. I will then apply these theories to my experience in public education and Waldorf education.

Historically, decolonial thought and feminist theory are tied through the history of the "Coloniality of Power". The concept of "Coloniality of Power," first introduced by Anibal Quijano, explains that through colonialism, white Eurocentric social classifications were universalized to encourage "modernity," a concept asserting what societal development/progress should look like (Lugones, 2009). The "Coloniality of Power" was then used to define the world in terms of "inferior" and "superior" societies. This construction preceded the capitalistic, universalized world systems we see today: Global North versus Global South; poor versus rich; white versus non-white; and male versus female. Maria Lugones criticized Quijano, asserting that he has failed to problematize the intersectionality between race and gender, and thus dives into further detail. This refers to the disconnection between race and gender in Quijano's theory. Gender as a construct was not only used to create the binary between male and female, but also to define race in a binary: white versus non-white (Lugones, 2009). In creating this gender binary, it not only provided the opportunity to label one gender as superior to another, but race as well. This applied to feminist theory; white women created and enforced this concept and extended Eurocentric gender norms to make this possible. Much like coloniality, feminist theory was contextualized in a space that

did not include the subjects of colonization, nor did it give them opportunities to problematize it. In this regard, decolonial thought is linked to the historical gender norms that were transplanted onto non-white women to create feminist theory. Thus, decolonial thought must recognize this legacy of colonial thought in feminist theory.

Lugones provides compelling examples of how colonialism used race and gender together to create what she calls "light" and "dark" sides of oppression. The "light" side of oppression refers to white women. The white women, with the creation of gender, were pushed into positions of subordination, characterizing them as fragile and sexually passive (Lugones, 2009, p. 203). Although this placed them in an oppressive situation, as they were viewed as subjects to white men, they still held the privilege of avoiding racialization. Non-white women were not so lucky. The "dark" side of gender, Lugones explains, includes the racialization tied to non-white women and their gender: aggressive, sexual, pervasive, and non-human (Lugones, 2009, p. 203). This was furthered by the sexual violence and aggression that was perpetuated by this classification. The aggressive nature of non-white women justified the sexual assault and domination of these women. Lugones references Collins (2000), with the image of Jezebel. Jezebel was the universal image used to define black women as sexually explicit and fertile (Lugones, 2009, p. 204). The colonial project confined non-white women into roles that increased levels of sexual oppression, creating a historical relationship between sexual oppression and women of color that is still seen today.

This sexual history of non-white women during colonial times was reflected onto the earth, with concepts of fertility, or economic opportunity. Fertility is heavily racialized and gendered, as Lugones briefly explains: Columbus, in his colonization of the Americas, provided sexually explicit imagery of non-white women, like "women consorted with apes, feminized male breasts flowed with milk", which was then passed onto depictions of the land (Lugones, 2009, p. 205). The land was the mother – "flowing with milk" an image tied to the nourishment of children– the creator of life in many Indigenous beliefs. The colonizers recognized this relationship and sexualized the Earth. The colonization of the Americas was depicted as the "raping" of the Earth, creating submission parralled in the treatment of non-white women (Segato, 2020). The Earth was then gendered; it was to be controlled and exploited just like the bodies of non-white women. Land was pillaged, controlled, and taken from indigenous communities for farming, overproduction, and consumerist values introduced by the colonizers.

Segato discusses how the bodies of women, especially Black women, were commodified in the context of colonialism much like how the Earth was. Wet nursing became a practice tied to the exploitation of enslaved women (Segato,

2020). These women's bodies were often viewed as mere vessels for reproduction and nurturing labor, stripped of their autonomy, and forced to serve the needs of white families or wealthy elites. In this context, the wet nurse's body was not seen as a subject with agency or identity but rather as an instrument to produce life and care for children of another race, often to the detriment of their own. This commodification of women's reproductive and nurturing roles highlights a deeper, systemic oppression that reduces women, particularly those of marginalized racial and social positions, to their utility in the service of others, much like Lugones's claim on the Coloniality of Power (Segato, 2020). Segato's argument points out that this dehumanization has long-lasting effects, as it connects the historical exploitation of women's bodies to present-day issues of racism, gender inequality, and the continued commodification of women in various spheres of life. This is paralleled in Trujillo's assessment on the commodification of the Earth. Her essay emphasizes how the commodification of the earth contributes to the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems that prioritize ecological balance and sustainability. It critiques the capitalist mindset that treats land as a mere asset to be used for profit, ignoring the intrinsic value of nature and the interconnectedness of all living beings (Trujillo, 2021). This parallel concept of commodification of the Earth and women's bodies has been universalized to the extent that it is normalized: something I will explain in my analysis of my educational experiences.

These are the basic theories that I will apply to my experience in both public school and Waldorf education. It is here I will introduce the two sides of my experiences, and analyze them with the above theories in mind.

From preschool through third grade, I attended a small Waldorf school in rural Vermont run by a local community of parents– emphasizing mothers. In third grade, I made the switch into public education. During the first field trip I ever attended in public school, we went to a local beach. At this beach I was teased for wearing a one-piece as opposed to a bikini by my female peers. They said that I was lame, bragged about how thin they looked in their bikinis, and tried to catch the much older lifeguards' attention by strutting around, pushing their child bodies out on display. This made me self-conscious. My mother shared that when I returned home, I asked if I could buy a bikini. My mother was shocked, and immediately refused. I was enraged; I didn't understand that my mother was protecting me from engaging in colonial power structures that placed a woman's value in her sexuality. As Lugones explained, the sexualization of women throughout coloniality not only served as a way to enforce gender binaries, but to create power structures between the sexes. With the encouragement of wearing bikinis at a young age, we are normalizing the process of socialization, and perpetuating the tie between a woman's value and her sexuality. Segato's analysis of the wet-nurses further supports this, as she argues that this relationship was

imbued with a complex mixture of domination and fetishization. White children were raised by these Black women, but rather than recognizing the wet nurses as caretakers or maternal figures, the colonial society often saw them through a lens of racialized sexuality. These women were frequently objectified, and their roles were sexualized, not just in the physical act of breastfeeding but in the broader colonial imaginary (Segato, 2020). In the present day, female children's bodies are also being sexualized to broaden colonial imagery; instilling this power structure and form of control as early as possible to eradicate the potential of problematization.

This is furthered by my mother's experience when she attempted to bring her concerns to the public school board. She claimed young girls should not be allowed to wear revealing clothing, as it sexualized them at a point in their life that they could not yet understand what it meant. She problematized the relationship between the value of women and sexualization. However, the school board dismissed her. I want to explain why my mother was dismissed using Segato's explanation of public versus private. She examines the two mothers myth present in Afro-Brazilian history; where motherhood is split between the biological, juridical mother (Iemanja) and the non-biological, adoptive mother (Oxum) concerning the oppressed history of black wet-nurses (Segato, 2020, p. 138-140). Within this example, I conceptualize my mother as Oxum, and the teacher as Iemanja. Natural depictions Segato provides for both roles help to solidify this argument: Iemanja being characterized as the ocean– powerful, vast, and unpredictable, which can both give life and reclaim it, embodying the ways white women have exuded power over their non-white women counterparts. Oxum is characterized as sweet river water, symbolizing the more domestic, caring, and nurturing aspects of womanhood (Segato, 2020). The teacher, in public school, holds the power of education over the mother, who is perceived as a strictly domestic being. In this regard, the Iemanja character represents the public– what is legitimate and displayed– versus the private– what is unacknowledged because it challenges the public. Segato focuses on a painting of a white child king clutching his black wet-nurse's breast, even as the wet-nurse is obscured (Segato, 2020, p. 145). This, Segato argues, is a publicly private scene: something I have understood as the intersection of the non-white woman's body and commodification. Non-white women's bodies were designated to the private– not to be acknowledged by society. In keeping these bodies private, it allowed white women (and coloniality as a whole) to commodify these women in terms of their gender, race, and labor (Segato, 2020). In terms of public education, I argue that my mother's voice was privatized in this same way to be silenced, or not acknowledged. In problematizing young girls wearing bikinis, my mother

challenged colonial systems of control. The private sphere, which is traditionally represented by mothers or caregivers, is often silenced in the public space of schools, leading to the erasure of maternal authority in favor of societal authority, perpetuating colonial control.

I bring in a decolonial approach to the sexualization of women's bodies by examining my Waldorf education's relationship with gender and sexuality. Unlike in public schools, the bathrooms in Waldorf were gender inclusive; boys, girls, and everything in between. There was what I will refer to as a "dress code", meaning there could be no sexually explicit clothing that showed the bodies of the young children. There was fierce protection and censorship from the internet, as many online educational tools adhere to colonial gender structures through clothing– dresses vs pants, and colors like pink and blue. Education can be used as a decolonial project by directly opposing colonial values and systems of oppression, like how Waldorf educators refuse to gender their teaching space. Trujillo's essay refers to colonialism's ability to "objectify, to make exploitable and disposable objects people and nature", in terms of women's bodies and sexuality (Trujillo, 2021, p. 205). She follows this by stating "women refuse to be mere companions to their male counterparts", one of the ways her studies subjects (Indigenous Campesina women) have shaped their society– illustrating that leveling the gender playing field is a decolonial project. In juxtaposing my experience with gender and sexualization in public school and Waldorf, I assert that education is a decolonial project– it can dismantle normalized values of women's sexual oppression, and the authority of the public sphere.

However, it is the different ways that education is valued that allows this decoloniality to be present. In public school systems, education is individualized and commodified. An example is that of timed math activities. I was first exposed to timed activities during public school, and was humiliated and belittled when I struggled to complete tasks within a timed setting. Colonialism has commodified education by turning learning into a product to be consumed rather than a process for genuine intellectual or personal growth. Using the example of timed math activities, we can see how this commodification works in practice. In colonial educational systems, standardized tests and time-bound activities are often used to measure students' success and efficiency, rather than fostering a deep understanding of critical thinking. These activities treat students as products that need to be shaped and evaluated based on narrow metrics, which can be disconnected from real-life problem-solving or creativity. This system reflects a colonial mindset, where education is designed to control and streamline knowledge production in ways that benefit a dominant group or structure, often at the expense of diverse, local, or culturally relevant forms of learning. Segato explains that this colonial mindset is so well accepted because of "universality". Universality functions as a means to normalize and legitimize the colonial project. Colonial

powers used the idea of universal values—such as civilization, progress, and rationality—to frame their exploitation and domination as beneficial for the colonized (Segato, 2022). These so-called universal values served to dehumanize colonized peoples, positioning them as "inferior" or "uncivilized," and justifying their subjugation in the name of bringing them up to the "universal" standard of the colonizers (Segato, 2022). The “universal” standard in education has been defined in terms of timed-tests, and standardized tests, that create a monolithic understanding of education. It functions as a tool of colonialism to rationalize and perpetuate systems of oppression, offering a false sense of objectivity in education, whereas the reality shows the manipulation of knowledge.

This commodification of the educational space is paralleled by the historical commodification of the earth. Colonizers commodified “people, nature, waters, mountains, etc.” (Trujillo, 2021, p. 205). This was a way to control these spaces, to define them in a manner that benefitted the colonial project. Education is now being used as a colonial space, just like the historical commodification of the Earth created a colonial space, and therefore more avenues of control.

The decolonial approach to education can be presented in my experience at Waldorf. Here, the earth's relationship to life, knowledge, and control was recognized. I was taught about life and death through both vegetable and animal farming; taught how to care for plants before taught to read; taught to recognize signs of distress in an environment before math; and rarely learned in a setting that was not outdoors. Waldorf educators problematized the commodification of the Earth by challenging it; we were taught that the Earth was something to care for, not to use. Not only that, but I was taught through the shared stories of the community. Trujillo explores this in Indigenous Campesina activism that stems from community stories, and lived experiences (Trujillo, 2021). Indigenous women hold a deep respect and connection to the land that they live on, referring to themselves not as “owners” but as “guardians” (Trujillo, 2021, p. 206). Trujillo focuses on the fact that these Campesina women have taken their own lived experiences and created theory and praxis that is specific to them– specialized forms of resistance. Specialized forms of resistance entail the recognition that there is not one process of decoloniality, and each community will engage with this concept in different ways (Trujillo, 2021, p. 206). Waldorf education is a form of specialized resistance; it works with a specific community, based on their needs, to challenge colonial thought. In my case, Waldorf educators tailored their resistance into teaching within nature, without gender, and between children and parents. In teaching children, Waldorf educators are focused on the future, much like how Trujillo asserts that Campesina women are looking to the future with an

eye on the past– Waldorf educators purposefully choose to change past narratives in their educational space.

Yet, Waldorf education is not without critique. Its origins in anthroposophy—developed by Rudolf Steiner—contain Eurocentric spiritual hierarchies that can unintentionally re-inscribe colonial logics. Despite its emphasis on decolonial values, Waldorf spaces are often racially and economically homogeneous, limiting access for marginalized communities. The high tuition costs make Waldorf education largely inaccessible to low-income families, thus reinforcing class stratification and aligning with capitalist structures that commodify quality education. In this way, Waldorf schools—though rhetorically anti-capitalist—often function within and support capitalist frameworks by offering an elite, alternative product to those who can afford it. Its de-emphasis on technology and global perspectives can also isolate it from broader structural critiques. While it fosters emotional intelligence and ecological awareness, it can fall short of engaging with systemic racism or class oppression unless intentionally reformed.

Thus, while Waldorf education may serve as a localized, decolonial project in practice, it must confront its limitations and histories to fully embody decolonial praxis. As Trujillo notes, resistance must be rooted in lived experience—there is no universal model for decoloniality. For Waldorf to fulfill its potential, it must honor community and Earth and explicitly engage with race, power, and history.

In answering the questions posed at the start, decoloniality and feminist theory are historically intertwined through the "coloniality of power," which fused race, gender, and capitalism into a global hierarchy. Integrating these theories into K–12 education allowed further control of the narrative by the colonizers—a standardized, Eurocentric curriculum instead of embracing community-based, culturally grounded learning. It has also been shown that the public school system has long manipulated history to hide colonialism's legacy—silencing maternal voices, sexualizing children, and reducing learning to a commodified output. My lived experience confirms this. But it also confirms the potential for education as a decolonial force—if we are willing to reimagine it radically. To refer back to bell hooks, we have the opportunity to engage in visionary feminism. To hook, visionary feminism is a movement that cuts across women of all races, ethnicities, geographies, and socioeconomic statuses to seek myriad cultural, economic, and political forms of empowerment. We have the opportunity to imagine a future for education that centers itself on the needs and wants of every community, the knowledge of every community, and to the benefit of every community.

References

Lugones, M. (2009). *Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system*. Hypatia, 22(1), 186–209.

Segato, R. L. (2020). *Black Oedipus: Coloniality and the foreclosure of gender and race*.

Trujillo, M. A. (2021). *Fighting for life with our feet on the ground: Anticolonial and decolonial wagers from Indigenous and campesina women in Mexico*

McKenna Faith Zaleski Crance *is a full-time student at Macalester College, MN, studying as a Spanish, Latin American Studies, and Educational Studies triple major. Her area of focus is the importance of decolonial education and what that means in the context of the United States. She hopes to participate in a study away semester in Ecuador, through the Fundacion Pachaysana, which is a grassroots community organization focused on decolonizing education. McKenna grew up in rural Vermont and is one of three triplet sisters. She attributes her academic inspiration to her childhood experiences– as she attended Public, Waldorf, and private schools prior to college– which exposed her to the myriad of ways education functions in the U.S. She loved her experience at her Waldorf school in early childhood, as this form of education catered to the individual needs of each student while situating knowledge in the natural world. In her spare time, McKenna enjoys reading, hiking, swimming, and riding horses. Most recently, she worked for Vermont Northwoods providing service work maintaining and building trails in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. Her interest in education is deeply tied to her love of nature, and desire to help with the climate crisis, thus she makes efforts to work summer jobs that are related to stewardship of the natural environment. During college she works as a swim teacher, a lifeguard, and a barn hand in her local community.*

Maternalism Toward Environment in Richard Powers' The Overstory and Bewilderment

Md Mozaffor Hossain
Teaching Assistant, PhD (1st Year)
Department of English, Ohio University

Abstract

Richard Powers' The Overstory and Bewilderment portray maternalism as an ethical, learned, and relational practice of environmental care. In both novels, Powers shows that scientific research, spiritual awareness, emotional resilience, and technological innovation are vital to environmental activism. However, they become effective only when joined with a consciously chosen ethic of care that nurtures the earth as the earth has nurtured humanity. Drawing on ecofeminist thinkers such as Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Karen Warren, Samira Kawash, and Andrea O'Reilly, this study explores how Powers redefines motherhood beyond biology, as an ethical stance shaped by emotional connection, scientific commitment, and sustained responsibility.

In The Overstory, characters like Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, and Dorothy Cazaly blend maternal values with science, spirituality, and emotion. In Bewilderment, Alyssa Byrne's care continues after her death, influencing her son Robin's ecological awakening through emotional memory and neurofeedback. Across both novels, Powers presents maternalism as the force that transforms grief, love, and ethical concern into environmental action. This article argues that Powers imagines environmental care not as instinct or duty, but as a voluntary and transformative practice. His vision invites readers to see maternal ethics as a path toward ecological healing in an age of crisis.

Keywords: ecofeminism, maternal care, environmental ethics, Richard Powers, *The Overstory, Bewilderment*

The climate change crisis requires us to understand the relationship between humans and nature because our actions directly and indirectly affect the environment. Contemporary literature can provide new ways of understanding this

relationship. Among the literary approaches, ecofeminist readings, in particular, offer a meaningful opportunity to explore how women and the environment are deeply interconnected – helping us view ecological issues through a gendered lens. Marxist sociologist Maria Mies and Indian ecofeminist scholar Vandana Shiva, in their book *Ecofeminism* (1993), define ecofeminism as "a new term for an ancient wisdom" that recognizes the deep connection between women and nature, both of whom are devalued and controlled under capitalist patriarchy (Mies and Shiva 45). They argue that ecofeminism calls for cooperation, balance, and respect for life rather than control and exploitation. American philosopher Karen J. Warren, in her edited volume *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (1997), adds that ecofeminism exposes the conceptual roots of this domination, showing how the same logic that justifies the subordination of women also underpins the exploitation of nature (Warren 15). Together, these definitions call for new ecological models shaped by ethical commitment, relational awareness, and an active sense of shared responsibility. Building on these ideas, how Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and *Bewilderment* (2021) portray maternal modes of engagement with the environment, presenting care and ethical responsibility as powerful responses to ecological crisis, are explored.

Richard Powers' novels *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment* contribute to the conversation surrounding the environment and contemporary climate change by showing how deeply human lives are connected to nature and by encouraging readers to care more about the natural world. In these narratives, Powers crafts women characters who commit to improving the non-human world through emotional, ethical, and nurturing work. Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, Dorothy Cazaly, and Alyssa Byrne combine environmental activism, scientific research, and advancements in technology with a maternal ethic of care to nurture and care for the planet. Their journeys show how care for nature emerges through deliberate engagement, shaped by personal growth and ethical awareness. Powers thus reimagines maternal care as a learned and chosen relationship with the Earth and with other human beings.

By enacting maternal ecofeminism, these characters express a form of maternalism that centers on nurturing, protecting, and emotionally connecting with the natural world. In this context, maternalism is a political strategy that "draws on maternal identity, authority, or responsibility" to claim space in the public sphere (Kawash 971). It functions as a "strategic, anti-essentialist mode of political engagement" that mobilizes maternal values without relying on "a presumed maternal essence" (Bracewell and Daily 236). Powers' women characters do not simply conform to traditional roles of motherhood. Rather, they become mothers to nature, not because they are women, but because they develop relationships of care and reciprocity with the environment. Reciprocity means the mutual and responsive dependence between humans and nature – a relationship in which, from

Powers' perspective, humans must learn to care for nature just as nature has always cared for them. Characteristically, reciprocity in alignment with the ideas of maternalism and relationships, as all three emphasize ethical responsiveness, care, and mutual connection are used. Similarly, relationships mean the ethical, emotional, and social bonds humans form with others, human or more-than-human, not as a function limited to environmentalism, but as a core aspect of what it means to be human. Their commitment to ecological care emerges through deliberate attention to the needs of the more-than-human world, that is, the interconnected lives of trees, animals, and ecosystems beyond human society.

Ecofeminist scholar Lynn Stearney warns that using motherhood as a central ecofeminist model may risk essentializing women's identities (145). To avoid this, we must understand Powers' incorporation of the ethics of maternalism as a deliberate literary strategy that challenges the conventional "Mother Nature" image by "insisting on the particularity and specificity of motherhood while at the same time rejecting any notion of a fixed or essential aspect of maternal experience, desire, or subjectivity" (Kawash 972). Instead of nature nurturing humans exclusively, Powers also presents women as nurturers of nature through conscious, relational choices. Feminist author Andrea O'Reilly's view supports this idea. She argues that maternal roles are not instinctive, but socially and emotionally constructed (13-14). Andrea O'Reilly's view helps explain that maternal traits are learned, shaped by personal experience, emotions, and social values. In *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*, the women characters are not naturally or automatically nurturing. They become maternal toward nature through learning, understanding, and making ethical choices. Their care for the environment is not instinct, but a deep, thoughtful response to the world around them. Following this perspective, how Powers' characters learn to care for nature in addition to fighting for the environment with scientific research, spiritual awakening, emotional redirection, and technological intervention is explored. In the process they also learn to care more for other humans by caring for trees, animals, and ecosystems. In doing so, they become powerful agents of ecofeminist thought.

Maternalism as an Ecofeminist Development

Maternalism, as it has developed within ecofeminist thought, is not a return to biological determinism but a transformative ethic of care rooted in political, emotional, and environmental consciousness. It grew from the early ecofeminist insight that the domination of women and nature share the same patriarchal origins (Mies and Shiva 13–14; Warren 1). Initially, ecofeminism used symbolic associations, such as "Mother Earth", to link women's identities with natural care. However, this risked reinforcing gender essentialism. Scholars like Lynn Stearney and Andrea O'Reilly pushed back, arguing that maternal identity must not be reduced to biology, but reimagined as a social and ethical practice.

This shift gave rise to maternalism as a political strategy within ecofeminism. Samira Kawash emphasizes that maternalism is “a practice, a labor, and a relation, not simply an identity” (Kawash 972). Lorna Bracewell and Anna Daily define it as a “strategic, anti-essentialist mode of political engagement” (236), where care becomes a tool for public action. In this context, ‘political engagement’ refers to a conscious decision to participate in and influence one’s community, an active, relational effort to create ethical impact beyond the private sphere. This view allows maternalism to be inclusive, chosen, and grounded in accountability. Feminist care theorists like Virginia Held and Sara Ruddick further deepen this idea by describing maternal practices as moral work that responds to specific needs and relationships (Held 36; Ruddick 24).

Over time, ecofeminism has embraced maternalism as an evolving framework, an ethic that joins empathy with activism, and memory with responsibility. The maternal figures in Richard Powers’ fiction reflect this evolution: they are not defined by motherhood but by sustained acts of ecological care. Their commitment is grounded in relational awareness, grief, and ethical attention. In this way, maternalism emerges from ecofeminism as a radical, enduring form of resistance that centers care as a force for healing both the planet and the social systems that harm it.

Significance

Powers’ approach is significant because it reframes environmental activism as a moral and emotional practice rooted in care rather than control. His characters develop connections with forests, animals, and ecosystems not only through research, technology, ideology, or protest, but through grief, empathy, attention, and responsibility. This vision of activism asks readers to rethink environmental responsibility as something personal and emotionally transformative. By highlighting this vision, Powers questions dominant systems that often dismiss emotional labor and relational ethics, and instead presents these qualities as central to climate consciousness. Powers’ work contributes to a broader shift in ecological storytelling which centers emotional awareness and ethical growth as meaningful responses to ecological crisis.

The argument is that an intentional, ethical practice that arises from lived experiences of ecological loss is an essential part of our response to environmental degradation. While earlier ecofeminist studies have explored the spiritual or reproductive links between women and nature (Merchant 2; Starhawk 237; Shiva 214), Powers portrays the maternal care of nature as something we all must learn and enact. He shows, using women characters who are deeply involved in environmental rescue, that true environmental activism must combine knowledge, technology, and a deep practiced ethic of care. His narratives make space for a more inclusive understanding of care which is not limited to gender or biology, but

grounded in response, choice, and action. This reading also brings ecofeminist theory into conversation with contemporary, male-authored fiction. Drawing on the work of Samira Kawash, Lorna Bracewell, and Anna Daily, it demonstrates how Powers creates female characters who are not symbolic "Earth Mothers," but fully conscious agents. Their emotional depth becomes a source of environmental strength. This perspective helps reimagine care ethics not as passive or feminine-coded, but as deeply human and vital to confronting today's ecological realities.

Literature Review

This literature review follows a chronological order, beginning with the earliest critical discussions of *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*, and moving toward more recent interpretations. This approach helps trace how scholarly responses to Powers' work have developed. It also includes foundational texts on ecofeminism and feminist theories of motherhood and maternalism that inform this analysis.

A useful early source is M. Raja Vishwanathan and Jismy K. Joseph's 2019 article in *Language in India*. They argue that *The Overstory* portrays human civilization as needing collaboration with other beings. Powers, they suggest, positions trees not as passive objects but as active subjects. This perspective reinforces the claim of this article that Powers challenges anthropocentric thinking and imagines ecological relationships as reciprocal.

Building on this focus, Gandotra and Agrawal, writing in *Rupkatha Journal* (2020), examine how *The Overstory* connects women and nature through shared life-sustaining roles. While their view risks essentialism, it introduces the idea of nurturing as central to environmental care. Their reading also hints how Powers reframes this care as an ethical stance learned through experience, not bound to biology.

Furthering this conversation, Laura DeLuca, in a 2022 article in *The Explicator*, shifts attention to the novel's treatment of time. She argues that Powers contrasts human urgency with the slower temporality of trees. Her insights support the view that maternalism in Powers' work matures through patience and ongoing care, much like the life cycles of trees themselves.

The most recent contribution comes from Hedwig Fraunhofer, whose 2024 article in *ISLE* builds on Baptiste Morizot's concept of a "crisis of sensibility." She views Patricia Westerford's work as a form of multispecies translation – an effort to restore lost connections between humans and the natural world. This reading deepens the interpretation of Patricia's activism as rooted in relational attentiveness and ethical restoration.

Because Powers' *Bewilderment* was published recently (2021), it has received fewer scholarly interpretations, most of which are reviews. This article

discusses these in chronological order, highlighting recurring concerns and themes that illuminate the novel's emotional and ecological focus.

One of the earliest reviews comes from Ron Charles in *The Washington Post* (2021). He argues that *Bewilderment* condemns humanity's environmental destruction and the systemic inertia that prevents change. Powers, he notes, urges readers to grasp the tragedy as experienced by a sensitive child.

Building on this emotional angle, Rebecca Onion, writing in *Slate* (2021), explores how the novel captures the mental strain that ecological collapse places on children. She cites a global survey showing that 59 percent of youth feel "very or extremely worried" about climate change, often overwhelmed by negative emotions. This reading supports the view of maternal care as a response to such ecological grief.

A year later, Sharmila Narayana and Hutulu Dasai, in *English Academy Review* (2022), expand the conversation by interpreting Robin's emotional struggles as emblematic of a broader generational anxiety. They argue that Powers compels readers to reconsider their relationship with nature and their responsibilities toward it (132–33).

Most recently, Kanza Fatima Mirza and Rehan Ahmad (2024), writing in the *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, introduce the concepts of "solastalgia" and "biophilia" to describe how Alyssa, Theo, and Robin turn to nature for solace amid environmental degradation. Their analysis highlights how Powers frames nature not just as a setting, but as a source of emotional restoration and ethical guidance (78).

Existing interpretations of *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment* often focus on humanity's failure to value nature and the greed that leads to ecological destruction. Building on this, scholars like Samira Kawash, and Lorna Bracewell and Anna Daily offer frameworks for understanding maternalism as an intentional, political, and ethical stance. Kawash, in her article "New Directions in Motherhood Studies" (*Signs*, 2011), defines maternalism as a political strategy that "draws on maternal identity, authority, or responsibility" to intervene in the public sphere during times of crisis (971). Expanding this idea, Bracewell and Daily, in their 2023 essay "This Is a Work for the Mothers," describe maternalism as a "strategic, anti-essentialist mode of political engagement" that responds to social harm without relying on "a presumed maternal essence" (236).

To ground the study in ecofeminist theory, this article turns to foundational thinkers Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, who argue that the oppression of women and the degradation of nature share the same patriarchal roots. They call for alternatives based on cooperation, care, and sustainability (14). Ecofeminist philosopher Karen J. Warren extends this argument by demonstrating how the same logic that justifies the domination of women – through cultural dualisms such as mind/body, male/female, and reason/nature – also enables environmental

exploitation. She argues that an ethic of domination must be replaced with one based on care, trust, empathy, and appropriate reciprocity (Warren 9). Importantly, Warren shows that maternalism, understood not as biological instinct but as ethical, relational care, provides a framework for reshaping how humans engage with the environment and with one another. Her work helps situate maternal care within ecofeminism as a critical and moral response to domination, both social and ecological.

Further linking ecofeminism and maternalism, Mary Phillips (2016) argues that ecofeminist care ethics offer a redefined maternalism that resists both neoliberal individualism and gender essentialism. She describes this as "embodied care," a mode of ethical responsibility that connects personal, political, and ecological well-being. In her view, maternalism becomes a relational practice of care for more-than-human life, grounded in ecofeminist commitments to interdependence and social transformation. Phillips thus provides a crucial link between ecofeminism and maternalism by showing how care for the planet must emerge through emotional presence, ethical attention, and inclusive social ethics.

These frameworks shape the understanding of maternalism as a learned and ethical response to ecological crisis and support the reading of Powers' characters as agents of feminist environmental care.

This essay is structured into three sections. Section One analyzes how maternalism is expressed through Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, and Dorothy Cazaly in *The Overstory*, focusing on their relationships with nature and the ethical choices they make. It examines how scientific inquiry, spiritual awakening, and personal transformation shape their environmental engagements.

In Section Two, this article explores the representation of maternal care in *Bewilderment*, particularly through Alyssa Byrne's influence as a living presence, a posthumous memory, and a source of healing through technological means. This section considers how maternal ethics can endure, adapt, and guide environmental consciousness across time and form.

In Section Three, this article connects these literary portrayals to ecofeminist theory, arguing that Richard Powers integrates scientific knowledge, spiritual sensibility, and maternal ethics to offer a reimagined vision of environmental care that moves beyond instinct or gender and toward a deliberate, relational way of living with the Earth.

Finally, the article concludes by asserting that Richard Powers presents maternalism as a conscious and ethical practice of environmental care. He shows maternal values as a product of learning, attention, and emotional experience. These values, when combined with scientific pursuits, spiritual awakening, emotional care, and technological advancement, can bring lasting welfare to the environment. They support the well-being of both humans and the natural world. Powers suggests a new form of ecofeminism that grows through chosen

relationships and intentional care. This vision activates an ethic of responsibility that moves beyond fixed identities and opens new paths for ecological healing.

Section One: Maternalism Toward Environment in *The Overstory*

In *The Overstory*, Richard Powers explores environmental activism through characters whose engagement with nature transcends scientific, spiritual, or emotional investment. Central to this exploration are Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, and Dorothy Cazaly. Patricia's scientific discovery, Olivia's spiritual awakening, and Dorothy's emotional struggles lead them toward a conscious commitment to care for nature. Powers emphasizes that real change requires a sustained practice of caring for the natural world. This practice is an active, enduring, and non-biological mode of responsibility rooted in ethical attentiveness.

In this context, care refers to a learned, intentional, and relational practice of nurturing the environment. This form of care reflects definitions of maternalism found in feminist scholarship, which describe it as a conscious, ethical, and socially constructed practice. Lorna Bracewell and Anna Daily define maternalism as a strategic, anti-essentialist form of care arising from ethical commitment and public responsibility rather than biological instinct (236). Their definition frames the argument that Powers' characters choose maternal care in response to environmental crisis. Andrea O'Reilly explains that maternal traits are shaped by emotional experience and cultural values, not biology (13–14). Her theory positions mothering as a political and ethical practice. This supports the reading of Powers' women characters as agents of ecological care, not because they are women, but because they learn to nurture through responsibility and love. Samira Kawash adds that maternalism must be seen as an ethical stance shaped by deliberate choice and reflection. She writes that motherhood is "a practice, a labor, and a relation – not simply an identity" (Kawash 972). This strengthens the reading of Patricia, whose care for trees grows out of daily attention, humility, and learned devotion. Together, these scholars provide the theoretical foundation for the interpretation of maternalism as a chosen ethic of environmental responsibility in *The Overstory*.

This section examines how Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, and Dorothy Cazaly cultivate personal pathways of ecological engagement, scientific, spiritual, and emotional, while also learning to nurture the earth to produce transformative environmental action. Ecofeminist theorist Karen Warren advocates for this kind of environmental care. She asserts that ecofeminism promotes an "ethic of loving perception," which fosters care by recognizing difference and forming relationships rooted in responsibility and respect (Warren 9). Such care resists domination and motivates ecological transformation through empathy and connection.

Through close analysis of their development, this article argues that Powers envisions activism as a practiced, inclusive, and ethical relationship with the Earth rooted in a learned form of maternalism – a conscious choice to nurture, protect, and remain responsible for the more-than-human world. Laura DeLuca explains that Powers highlights how humans can slow their destructive pace by learning to live with the patience and endurance of trees, embracing a slower, relational temporality (DeLuca 78–80). Hedwig Fraunhofer shows that Powers urges humans to relearn attentiveness and ethical relations with nonhuman beings through multispecies translation (Fraunhofer 1–3).

This understanding of time matters because it asks readers to shift their moral imagination from a short-term, human-centered perspective to one that honors the slow intelligence of nature, where trees and ecosystems act over centuries. Powers' characters learn to live within this temporality, practicing patience, presence, and long-term care as essential components of environmental responsibility. In the novel, the women characters form emotional and ethical bonds with nature, showing that environmental activism requires sustained relational commitment rather than inherited identity.

Patricia's Scientific Pursuit and Ethics of Care

Patricia Westerford is one of the major women characters in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. Her ecological devotion emerges from her work as a dendrologist (one who studies trees) and from personal experiences of suffering, humility, and emotional connection. From an early age, she learns about plants from her father, an agricultural extension agent who quizzes her on trees during farm visits. These early encounters cultivate her deep bond with the forest.

While working as a student and later as a state research scientist, Patricia devotes herself to the study of trees. Her father teaches her to see trees "not as passive objects but as complex, living beings" (Powers 113–115). In her research, she discovers that trees communicate by sending chemical warnings in response to threats. She finds that "the wounded trees send out alarms that other trees smell," forming an interconnected immune system (126). Her conclusion that "these brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other" (126) reframes forests as cooperative communities. Because her ideas challenge traditional scientific views, the academic community dismisses her work as unrealistic and unscientific.

After publishing her findings, Patricia faces rejection from scientists who ridicule her work and undermine her credibility (Powers 127–128). This dismissal reveals how dominant systems often resist recognizing nonhuman intelligence and instead maintain human-centered models of knowledge. American ecofeminist scholar Donna Haraway, in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), reflects on how multispecies ways of knowing are discredited for not being "scientifically grounded experiments" and are instead viewed as "trivial, mere play" (Haraway

23). Haraway critiques the narrow scope of institutional science, which privileges measurable outcomes while dismissing relational knowledge. Powers dramatizes this problem through Patricia's expulsion from academia, showing how her observations are treated as imaginative rather than rigorous.

As a result, Patricia's university dismisses her and withdraws support for her research, which devastates her. Her withdrawal from academia is at first a profound defeat, filled with grief and isolation. Over time, she turns this into a conscious realignment of her values and attention. Patricia retreats into the wilderness as a Bureau of Land Management ranger. Living among the trees, she begins to listen to the forest differently – not as an outsider gathering data but as part of a living, breathing community. Powers writes, "She begins to see what she never saw before. The forest is a chorus of living wood singing to itself" (146). Her field notes begin to reflect a holistic understanding of the forest as a community in dialogue. As Mies and Shiva argue, environmental consciousness emerges from recognizing nature's interconnected vitality (45). Patricia's journey affirms this view, illustrating how ethical attentiveness can transform scientific knowledge into an empathetic relationship of care, what Kawash refers to as maternalism, a political and ethical stance that draws on maternal responsibility to intervene in public life without relying on essentialist ideas of motherhood (Kawash 971–972). In this shift from detached observation to lived empathy, Patricia embodies Powers' vision of activism as an ethic of maternal care. This care grows through attentiveness, humility, and devotion. It replaces dominance with listening and separation with relationship.

Patricia tends to the forest not through grand activism but through quiet presence. Powers describes her work as a wilderness ranger, helping to preserve old-growth trees and minimize human interference. Her notebooks fill with detailed observations of forest life (135–136, 217). Her lifelong commitment becomes environmental activism, where scientific knowledge is expressed through emotional awareness and ethical practice. Her work shows that care for the Earth can grow from steady attention and thoughtful action. Patricia teaches that one can choose to mother the Earth by nurturing through respect, love, and responsibility.

Patricia's scientific curiosity gradually transforms into environmental maternalism. Powers first describes how she records her findings with scientific precision: "Her report is all chemistry, concentrations, and rates – nothing but what the gas chromatography equipment records" (126). However, after her professional ostracization, living among trees day after day, her relationship with the environment deepens. The forest becomes her comfort and companion when human society rejects her. Powers writes, "Only the woods protect her from undying shame. She tramps the winter trails, feeling the thick, sticky horse chestnut buds with her frozen fingers" (127–128). Patricia's nurturing of the forest and the

forest's silent nurturing of her become reciprocal. Nature receives her care and offers healing and belonging.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, an Indigenous botanist and author of *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), describes this mutual bond as a sacred exchange. She says, "Knowing that you love the earth changes you. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, it becomes a sacred bond" (Kimmerer 124). As Patricia camps under the spruce and fir, Powers describes "the living earth beneath her bag, its fluid influence rising up into the fiber of her and all the towering trunks that surround and watch over" (129). Through this mutual relationship, Patricia experiences nature not as an object of study but as a sustaining presence, helping her rebuild identity through connection, humility, and trust. She gives back to the forest through quiet care and protection, showing that the relationship must be shared. Karen Warren explains that real environmental care must be based on relationships of mutual support, not control (Warren 15). Patricia's journey shows that nurturing the Earth and being nurtured by it are deeply connected, and both are essential for survival.

Patricia's environmental maternalism emerges from her persistent, relational engagement with the nonhuman world. Powers captures the intimacy of this bond when he writes, "She's been alone too long not to talk to things" (147). The line reveals how her long isolation draws her into companionship with nature, where trees become listeners and allies. Her devotion is not instinctive; it is a learned, deliberate practice shaped by rejection, exile, and continual attentiveness to the life around her. Powers notes,

> She camps out many nights under the spruce and fir, completely lost, turned wildly around by the smell of inland oceans, sleeping on beds of thick lichen, the living earth beneath her bag, its fluid influence rising up into the fiber of her. (129)

Here, Patricia is becoming part of nature through conscious, loving immersion. The argument here aligns with Hedwig Fraunhofer's reading of *The Overstory*, which emphasizes that overcoming the "crisis of sensibility" requires humans to relearn how to notice, appreciate, and care for other living beings (16). This is important because Fraunhofer sees modern humans as ontologically cut off from the more-than-human world. It is a detachment that prevents them from recognizing the agency, meaning, and ethical presence of nonhuman life. Relearning how to perceive and care across species boundaries is, for her, essential to restoring these broken relationships. Patricia's maternalism reflects this anti-essentialist vision, portraying environmental activism as an ethical, practiced form of relationship rather than a biological instinct. Her journey demonstrates that environmental activism must combine knowledge with relational care, rather than

relying on scientific achievements alone. Instead, it emerges through quiet, enduring acts of nurturing connection with the nonhuman world. By mothering the forest through attention, humility, and devotion, Patricia offers a model of activism grounded in the ethics of nurturing. Powers presents this model as essential for the survival of both human and nonhuman life.

Olivia's Spiritual Awakening and Ethics of Care

Olivia Vandergriff's journey in *The Overstory* is an example of how a nurturing ethic toward the environment can be awakened through personal crisis and spiritual transformation. When the novel opens, Olivia is a carefree college student studying Actuarial Science. She comes from a privileged background, takes drugs, fails her courses, and drifts through life without purpose. After being electrocuted in a dormitory shower and declared clinically dead for over a minute, Olivia undergoes a radical shift. She feels visited by mysterious beings who guide her to protect the redwood forests in the American West. From that moment, she feels deeply connected to nature and sees the world with new eyes. Powers writes that "huge, living sentinels know who she is" (158).

As she follows her vision, she meets Nick Hoel, whose family has long documented trees through art. Olivia pulls Nick into her mission with conviction. Powers describes her spiritual intensity: "She's lit from the inside. She hums. She glows. She burns with something entirely new: purpose" (161). Olivia becomes a leader through clarity and courage. Powers notes, "He is the child now and she is the guardian" (159), showing that she takes on a nurturing role – not of people, but of life itself.

Her environmental caregiving is bold and active. She climbs trees, lives among them, and stands between them and the loggers. Powers writes, "She needs only lower her chin and the others fall silent... She has taken advice from things larger than man" (345). Her nurturing is about courage, presence, and chosen responsibility. Her care takes the form of defiance and endurance.

Olivia's transformation is not destiny. Powers contrasts her earlier aimlessness with her later purpose. Her care for nature is awakened through spirituality, which becomes an ethical orientation. Starhawk calls this "power-from-within," a conscious energy emerging from practice and connection (Starhawk 4). Greta Gaard affirms that spiritual and emotional awareness can support ecofeminist ethics when shaped by intentional relationships and critical reflection (Gaard 2). Olivia's care becomes meaningful through the choices she makes and the commitments she sustains. Her maternal strength grows from her repeated commitment to protect life, even when it puts her in danger. During a final protest, perched in the trees and facing death, she says, "If we're wrong, we pay the price. They can't take more than our lives. But if we're right? And everything alive tells me that we are…" (345). These words reflect ethical

conviction. Olivia stands with the trees because she sees care and resistance as part of the same moral path.

Olivia's spiritual calling alone does not define her. It is her response – her actions, sacrifices, and persistence – that make her a maternal figure for the forest. Powers writes, "What she did wasn't reckless. It was in line with the order of things. The first rule of Earth is that everything is connected. The second: It all goes on" (377). Olivia becomes part of that continuity not through inheritance, but through deliberate alignment with life's interconnectedness. Even after her death during the protest, the forest absorbs her sacrifice. Nick later feels her presence among the trees, suggesting her spirit continues as part of the Earth she protected.

Through Olivia, Powers presents a vision of maternalism that is spiritual, learned, and deeply transformative. Her story shows that caring for nature can arise from unexpected places, not from biology, but from choice. Olivia mothers the forest not because she is a woman, but because she becomes someone who dares to feel, speak, and sacrifice for the living world. It is a commitment that reflects what Andrea O'Reilly describes as the socially and emotionally learned role of mothering, shaped by experience, responsibility, and love (13–14). Samira Kawash reinforces this view by arguing that motherhood is not a passive instinct but "a practice, a labor, and a relation – not simply an identity" (972). Her framing helps us see Olivia's care as an ethical project rather than a biological response. Sara Ruddick also calls maternal thinking "a discipline that arises from the daily practices of caregiving, requiring reflective judgment and emotional engagement" (24). Olivia's journey echoes this logic as she transforms spiritual awakening into sustained ethical action. In doing so, she becomes a role model to others such as Nick and inspires collective action to protect the forests. Olivia's journey shows that environmental activism must arise from emotional connection, ethical commitment, and conscious nurturing of the nonhuman world. Through her transformation, Powers illustrates that saving the Earth requires a learned and enduring maternalism, a form of care that humans must choose if they are to live responsibly with nature.

Dorothy's Emotional Struggle and Ethics of Care

Unlike Patricia or Olivia, Dorothy Cazaly's connection to nature develops gradually, shaped by the rhythms of ordinary life and the depths of personal loss. Her journey begins with her marriage to Ray Brinkman. As a gesture of love, Ray suggests that they plant a tree each year on their marriage anniversary. In his letter, he writes, "Not everything we plant will take. Not every plant will thrive. But together we can watch the ones that do fill up our garden" (71). While this is an act of giving life, it is a symbolic gesture as well, reflecting the idea that relationships must be tended with patience, and that some losses are inevitable, but growth is still possible. Dorothy is moved by the symbolism in his words and

chooses to remain with him, saying simply, "Let's plant something" (72). What begins as a shared act of affection eventually transforms into a meaningful form of environmental connection.

As time passes, Dorothy yearns to give birth to a child. She and Ray spend years trying to conceive. When doctors confirm that they cannot have a child, her despair is deep and all-consuming. Her grief almost silences her. In this moment of emotional collapse, she remembers the living things she and Ray have nurtured together, i.e., the trees they planted in love. Powers writes that "out in the yard, all around the house, the things they planted in years gone by are making significance, making meaning" (168). The trees they once planted fulfill a life-giving purpose, continuing growth and significance even when human hopes have been disappointed. Dorothy returns to their garden not just to continue a tradition, but to give life in another form. By planting trees, she participates in a different kind of mothering, nurturing new life through care, patience, and renewal.

Thus, Dorothy's maternalism is not tied to biology. Powers never frames her childlessness as a failure, although it initially brings her sadness. Instead, he shows how she channels her longing into an alternative maternal ethic. Her ethics echo Karen J. Warren's idea that "care for nature arises from relational responsibility, not from biological destiny" (15). What Warren underlines here is that caring for nature is not something women do because of their biological roles as mothers. Instead, it is a moral and relational choice, shaped by ethical awareness and a commitment to interconnection. Dorothy turns her pain into attentiveness to the life that still surrounds her and is in danger of being overlooked and lost amid human indifference. The trees she and Ray have nurtured become the recipients of her deepening devotion, which grows not from instinct but from intention. She finds renewal in this practice, and her symbolic motherhood is expressed not through raising children but through sustaining the living landscape outside her window. Powers writes, "This was all she could do: keep planting, and hope the things she put in the ground would root and grow" (313).

Unlike Patricia's scientific conviction or Olivia's fierce resistance, Dorothy's environmental commitment comes not through vision or rejection, but through quiet memory and repeated acts. Powers shows that caring for the Earth does not always require radical change. Sometimes it begins with planting a seedling, or tending to what has already been planted, even when one's own life feels barren. It begins with taking time and slowly attempting to discern how trees reveal themselves. As such, Dorothy's vision of the world shifts. She is amazed by nature's details that she overlooked for years, the slow unfolding of leaves, the silent labor of roots, the quiet persistence of life. As Laura DeLuca explains, Powers contrasts the "quick-time" of humans with the enduring, static temporality of trees, showing that "humans are able to slow down and see the world from a perspective akin to that of trees" (79–80). Dorothy's slow noticing of trees allows

her to align herself with the patient rhythms of the nonhuman world, and in doing so, she realizes the significance of staying present with life that continues quietly and faithfully across time. She begins to understand care as something that is sustained through memory, attention, and responsibility. DeLuca also observes that trees in *The Overstory* serve as enduring symbols of memory and meaning, contrasting with human forgetfulness and loss (78). This means that while humans tend to forget or lose connection with the past, trees hold onto memories and become living memorials. In nurturing trees and finding significance in their persistent growth, Dorothy partakes in a slower, memorial temporality, where care and remembrance intertwine. Dorothy learns that motherhood is not limited to reproduction. It is a way of relating, staying present, nurturing growth, and remaining faithful to life in its vulnerable, rooted forms.

Through Dorothy, Powers offers a vision of environmental maternalism that is shaped by grief but carried forward by hope. Her story shows that even in stillness and sorrow, a chosen ethic of nurturing can become a form of healing for both the self and the world. Through her quiet but persistent care, Dorothy embraces life as it unfolds in nature, giving life back to the world she once thought barren. Her nurturing becomes a form of chosen motherhood, imbedded not in human reproduction, but in sustaining the living landscape that endures beyond personal loss.

Conclusion

Patricia Westerford begins by uncovering how trees communicate through chemical signals, translating their hidden language into scientific understanding. Her care for trees and their habitats deepens even after her work is dismissed by the scientific establishment. Through years of solitude and dedication, she transforms her knowledge into a quiet, protective presence in the forest. Olivia Vandergriff, by contrast, undergoes a sudden awakening after a near-death event. Her bond with nature is powerful, spiritual, and defiant. She lives in the trees, speaks for them, and ultimately gives her life to defend them. Dorothy Cazaly offers yet another path. Faced with infertility and grief, she returns to the ritual of planting trees, finding in it a source of healing and ethical responsibility. Her care is grounded in memory, patience, and emotional resilience.

Together, these three women represent diverse expressions of environmental maternalism. None of them are mothers in the conventional sense, yet each chooses to care for the Earth, not as a biological destiny, but as a moral stance. Powers uses their stories to suggest that environmental action does not emerge from instinct or identity, but from the willingness to listen, protect, and remain faithfully connected to the more-than-human world. As Powers writes, “The best arguments in the world won’t change a person’s mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story” (429). In doing so, their stories awaken readers to

a new understanding of care. They show that environmental commitment must grow from emotional connection, ethical responsibility, and relational nurturing rather than from duty or logic alone. Through their lives, these characters become the story, the narrative of care that reshapes what environmental commitment can look like.

In a world where the Earth has sustained life through providing its air, water, forests, and the endless renewal of its ecosystems, Powers requires that we answer a pressing question: Can we, as humans, now learn to nurture it in return? *The Overstory* answers not with one path, but with many paths. Each path is forged by ordinary people who learn to care through choice, through listening, and through the slow work of living differently. This section shows that scientific knowledge, spiritual revelation, or emotional grief alone are not enough. Only when these are paired with an ethic of care – a consciously chosen and practiced maternalism, they can become powerful tools for ecological transformation.

Section Two: Maternalism Toward Environment in *Bewilderment*

In *Bewilderment*, Richard Powers continues the environmental themes he explored in his earlier work, *The Overstory*. However, in this novel, he shifts the focus from collective activism to the emotional landscape of a grieving father and son, using their intimate relationship as a new lens for environmental care. This move allows Powers to explore how ecological values are transmitted through love, memory, and emotional inheritance within a family. For the first time in his fiction, Powers introduces a biological mother, Alyssa Byrne, at the center of environmental ethics. Theo Byrne, an astrobiologist, and his nine-year-old son Robin are both struggling to make sense of life after the loss of Alyssa Byrne, Theo's wife and Robin's mother. Though Alyssa is physically absent, her spirit, values, and environmental vision form the emotional and ethical foundation of the novel. Alyssa dies in a road accident after swerving to avoid hitting an animal (Powers 191). It is an act that reflects her deep compassion for living beings. Her death, though sudden, reinforces the moral values she lived by and sets the tone for the ethical and emotional journey that follows. Her memory and influence live on not only in the hearts of her family but also in the systems that shape their thoughts, emotions, and choices. Powers presents Alyssa as a silent force whose presence is felt more strongly than many of his living characters, positioning her as the core of the novel's ecological message. Before her death, Alyssa worked as an animal rights lawyer and environmental advocate, dedicating her life to protecting nonhuman creatures. After her death, she returns in an unexpected form – her emotional patterns are preserved through advanced neurofeedback technology, allowing her values to guide and heal her son. This union of maternal

values with scientific innovation is central to Powers' vision – one's spiritual and environmental awareness must be carried into the future not just by memory or emotion, but by learned, intentional systems of care.

Bewilderment and *The Overstory* together form a meaningful narrative continuum. While *The Overstory* explores environmental activism through a collective movement of diverse characters bonded by their connection to trees, *Bewilderment* explores how ecological awareness can be transmitted through personal relationships, memory, and love. Both novels suggest that the planet cannot be healed through science or protest alone. Emotional responsibility, inner transformation, and moral attention are just as necessary. For this reason, this article examines these two novels side by side. *The Overstory* offers the forest's voice; *Bewilderment* echoes it through the quiet persistence of one woman's love and values. Together, they suggest that activism must begin at the level of care and that such care includes other aspects of maternalism, like protectiveness, nurturing, and a reciprocal bond.

This section focuses on Alyssa Byrne because her character embodies a conscious ethic of care rooted in empathy, emotional intelligence, and spiritual closeness to the natural world. Even more significantly, Powers extends her presence beyond death through a futuristic technology called decoded neurofeedback. Years earlier, Alyssa had participated in an experiment in which she was asked to summon the feeling of ecstasy while her brain was scanned. Dr. Martin Currier, a high-profile scientist and close friend of Alyssa's, preserved the scans as part of his research. After her death, he uses them to support Robin's emotional treatment. The result is a therapy that encodes Alyssa's emotional patterns, her calm, compassion, and ecological sensitivity, into a system that now guides her son's healing.

The sessions begin after Robin attacks a classmate who insults his mother. In response, the school principal recommends psychiatric intervention. However, Theo resists conventional methods. He believes that reconnecting Robin with his mother's values and emotional presence will help restore the boy's balance. The experimental treatment known as decoded neurofeedback, offered by Currier, allows Robin to align his brain activity with Alyssa's preserved emotional patterns. He does this not only to regulate his emotions, but also to reexperience the calm, love, and ethical clarity that his mother once embodied. During each session, Robin lies still under a scanner and tries to match his brain signals with hers, allowing him to feel her emotional state and reconnect with her care for life around him (Powers 108).

Through this technological bond, the novel reveals the deeper significance of maternal compassion. By linking Alyssa's ethics to scientific innovation, *Bewilderment* asserts that science and technology must be guided by emotional depth and moral intention. Alyssa is not merely a memory; she becomes a living

force whose care continues to shape the world. Robin channels her values into action by advocating for endangered species, while Theo supports his son with gentleness and attention. Together, they carry forward Alyssa's legacy of compassion and responsibility, demonstrating that true healing begins with a conscious ethic of care.

Alyssa's legacy continues through Robin, who responds to the world with the same emotional urgency and ethical concern that shaped his mother's life. Robin feels the pain of ecological destruction deeply and transforms that feeling into care-driven action. Robin draws endangered species, speaks passionately about animal life, and reacts with intensity to the suffering he witnesses around him. These responses are not random or isolated. They reflect a value system passed down from Alyssa, who dedicated her life to defending nonhuman creatures. Robin's emotional clarity and efforts to protect the natural world are not just personal reactions. They are a form of environmental maternalism sustained through intergenerational care. Alyssa's compassion becomes Robin's mission. Her values live on in his choices, making him a lasting expression of her love for life and her commitment to planetary healing.

Alyssa's environmental maternalism operates through multiple stages. First, her living embodiment of ethical care for the nonhuman world is explored. Next, it analyzes how her maternal values persist after her death through Robin's emotional inheritance. This ties directly to her preserved emotional patterns, transmitted through decoded neurofeedback, extend maternal ethics into futuristic healing. the speculative use of neurofeedback introduces a new way of imagining care – one that blends emotional memory with technological continuity and gestures toward a return to natural, non-linear rhythms of time. Powers invites us to consider how healing, when guided by maternal ethics, might unfold at the pace of ecosystems rather than the speed of machines, offering an alternative vision of the future grounded in slowness, attention, and reciprocity.

Alyssa's Environmental Care During Her Lifetime

Before her death, Alyssa embodies environmental maternalism through her actions and beliefs. As noted in section one, environmental maternalism is defined as a conscious and relational practice that draws on maternal values – such as empathy, protection, and attentiveness – to guide ecological responsibility, without relying on a presumed maternal essence (Bracewell and Daily 236; Kawash 971). Alyssa works as an animal rights lawyer and is a passionate birdwatcher. Her life is rooted in care for non-human beings. She is not loud or forceful in her activism, but firm, persistent, and deeply compassionate. Powers describes her as someone who can recognize birds not only by sight but by sound. Theo tells Robin, "Your mother was brilliant! She kept spotting them left and right… She didn't even have to see them. She knew them by ear" (Powers 11).

These small details emphasize her sensitivity to the non-human life around her. Powers further captures Alyssa's emotional reverence for nature when Theo recalls, "She said the forest was a cathedral" (Powers 60), presenting the natural world not merely as scenery, but as sacred ground deserving of reverence and protection. Her moral care for the environment and deep attention to the preservation of nature reflect the ecofeminist ethic, which links mothering with ecological responsibility. This aligns with ecofeminist scholar Karen Warren's view that care, love, trust, and reciprocity are central to how humans relate ethically to the natural world (Warren 405). This means that caring for the environment does not come from being a mother, but from choosing to act with care, patience, and responsibility – just as one might care for someone they love. Powers' take on ecofeminism demonstrates that anyone can choose to develop this kind of thoughtful relationship with nature.

Alyssa's work for and with animals is guided not just by facts, but by her morals. She connects ecological loss with human failure, asking, "Why is it so hard for people to see what's happening?" (Powers 131). This question, filled with sorrow and urgency, expresses her frustration with a society that refuses to acknowledge the destruction of nature. Her testimony to protect animals ends with a maternal plea,

> The creatures of this state do not belong to us. We hold them in our trust. The first people who lived here knew: all animals are our relatives. Our ancestors and our descendants are watching our stewardship. Let's make them proud. (Powers 56)

Here, Alyssa is saying that humans are not owners of animals or nature, but caretakers. She reminds us that we have a duty to protect the Earth for both those who came before us and those who will come after. Her words turn environmental care into a shared, long-term responsibility.

After her death, Alyssa's commitment to the preservation of the natural environment lives on through her son. This is the first instance in which we see Powers crafting an actual mother – not just a symbol of care, but someone who actively shapes her child's worldview. Her posthumous care for Robin is not separate from her wider environmental ethic; instead, it reflects the same values of empathy, protection, and responsibility. Although Alyssa is no longer present, her care continues to shape Robin's life. Guided by her love for nature, Robin carries her values forward as he begins to care for the environment in his own way. In raising Robin with these values, she ensures that her ethical vision continues beyond her own life. Robin inherits her emotional awareness and care for life. For example, Robin's refusal to eat meat – "Don't make me eat animals!" (Powers 103) – is not just a tantrum, but a moral stance formed as the result of Alyssa's

example. Later, when he connects with her brain pattern through neurofeedback (a therapy based on her preserved brain scan), Robin feels her calm, her empathy, and her connection to the natural world as if she were still guiding him. By using this speculative technology as a feature of Robin's therapy, Powers suggests that maternal care, if grounded in ethical intention, can transcend time and biology. He turns to futuristic methods not to glorify innovation, but to imagine new ways of preserving care in a world where natural rhythms are constantly disrupted. This vision aligns with Donna Haraway's idea that technology must be ethically re-appropriated and "used to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life" (Haraway 181). Similarly, Adeline Johns-Putra argues that care is not a fixed identity but a dynamic, contextual force that shapes both carer and cared-for through their encounter (129). By merging care, memory, and machine, Powers imagines a maternal ethic that survives through emotional continuity, not physical presence. And it is more akin to forest time. That means, like trees, this ethic of care passes knowledge through roots, grows slowly, and sustains life across generations through deep connection and lasting presence.

Inspired by the renewed emotional bond he experiences during therapy, Robin begins to express her values in action: he paints endangered species, raises funds, and speaks like a young activist. In all these ways, Alyssa's mothering becomes more than a family role. It becomes a philosophy that connects her offspring to her values of love, justice, and survival even after her death. As Ron Charles writes, Powers focuses not on "exploring the full scientific and political complexity of our environmental catastrophe," but instead "on how that tragedy is perceived by one special little boy," shaped by maternal emotional inheritance. What Charles means is that Powers chooses not to present climate change through facts or political arguments, but through the emotional world of a child who has been raised to care about the living world with empathy and responsibility. This choice shifts the focus toward personal experience and relational feeling, showing how emotional inheritance builds moral understanding. Robin's understanding of the environmental crisis comes from his mother's love and values, showing that emotional inheritance can shape environmental awareness just as strongly as scientific knowledge.

Alyssa's Posthumous Ethics of Care for the Environment

In *Bewilderment,* Alyssa's environmental impact does not end with her death. Instead, her teachings become a posthumous force that shape both her son's emotional development and the family's ongoing relationship with the natural world. Powers presents Alyssa as a moral compass whose maternal values continue to guide Theo and Robin, long after she is gone. Her empathy, tenderness, and justice extend from her parenting to her environmental advocacy, showing that her love for her son and her love for the Earth share the same emotional root. Her

bedtime ritual of praying for the wellness of all the creatures of the universe reflects her undivided parental care and concern. She used to pray, "May all sentient beings… be free from needless suffering" (Powers 24), a line that joins her maternal love with her ecological vision. Her ability to recognize birds by their songs and her belief that "the forest was a cathedral" (Powers 60) express the same thoughtful attention that shaped her parenting. Just as she once mothered Robin, she also mothered the world through advocacy.

Alyssa's testimony in support of protections for endangered animals reveals her ethics most clearly. Her words, "We hold them in our trust… Our ancestors and our descendants are watching our stewardship. Let's make them proud" (Powers 56), carry the weight of ancestral wisdom and future responsibility. She frames human care for animals not as charity or policy but as a sacred duty handed down through generations. The phrase "we hold them in our trust" implies a deep moral obligation. It signifies humans are not owners of animals or the Earth, but temporary guardians. Her mention of both "ancestors" and "descendants" places environmental action within a long timeline, where the past watches with expectation and the future waits in hope. Carolyn Merchant reflects a similar notion. She says, "The image of the earth as a nurturing mother was a cultural constraint as well as a psychological necessity," because it shaped how people treated nature with care and responsibility (Merchant 3). What Merchant means is that when people imagined the Earth as a mother, they felt morally responsible for protecting it, and this belief helped limit exploitation. Thus, the call to "make them proud" transforms ecological responsibility into a form of ethical parenting not only toward one's own children, but toward all life. In this moment, Alyssa becomes a voice of ecofeminist maternalism, advocating for a world where care is not limited by species, time, or bloodline.

In a review of *Bewilderment*, Rebecca Onion explains that the knowledge of ecological collapse may deeply affect a sensitive, intense child's mental state, and that the child's anxiety may, in turn, change a desperate parent's life. Robin's inherited eco-grief and emotional fragility mirror what Onion describes as a real-world surge in youth climate anxiety, where 59 percent of young people report being "very or extremely worried" about ecological destruction (Onion). In another review of *Bewilderment*, Sharmila Narayana and Hutulu Dasai connect Robin's struggle with the broader emotional toll of the climate crisis on children. They emphasize that Robin's struggles "symbolize the anxiety felt by children facing the climate crisis today" (132). By creating Robin, Powers represents a generation that feels ecological loss in deeply personal ways. Through Robin, Powers shifts the focus of the climate crisis to a more personal and maternal perspective. At the same time, Alyssa's influence allows Powers to show how ethical awareness can be passed down not through facts, but through love, memory, and care. Their bond gives emotional shape to the novel's moral vision. Robin's emotional inheritance

thus positions him not as a weak or unstable character, but as the carrier of Alyssa's ethical vision for a wounded world.

Alyssa's words live on in Robin's moral awareness. "Why is it so hard for people to see what's happening?" (Powers 131) he anguishes, as he sees the destruction of natural habitats and wildlife. Powers shows how Alyssa's ecological grief becomes generational, passed on to her son. Robin's urgent efforts to protect endangered species and his strong moral clarity reflect how he has inherited Alyssa's emotions and her conscious ethic of care. As Narayana and Dasai argue, Powers uses Robin's "emotional turmoil" to make readers reconsider their actions toward nature and recognize the urgency of ecological care (132–133). Theo, too, echoes Alyssa's spirit in the way he parents Robin with gentleness, storytelling, and resistance to medication. Alyssa's posthumous maternalism, then, is both emotional and ecological. She mothers the planet by raising a child who not only feels its pain but also carries her vision forward. Her legacy is not static; it becomes a living force that turns love into action and transforms maternal memory into environmental ethics.

Emotional Healing as an Act of Maternalism

Earlier in the section, how Alyssa's encoded emotional patterns guide was discussed Robin through neurofeedback therapy. Here, it returns to that connection to explore how Powers frames this emotional continuity as a form of maternal environmental activism. One of the most powerful ways Alyssa continues to care for the environment after her death in Bewilderment is through her lingering presence in Robin's emotional life. Though the novel does not dwell on the technical process, what matters is the emotional impact: Robin accesses Alyssa's compassion, calm, and ecological consciousness in a way that feels intimate and immediate. For him, the therapy becomes a form of ethical anchoring. It soothes his grief and reorients his moral world. Alyssa's maternal care, once expressed through direct relationship, now moves through time as a kind of encoded empathy. Powers thus presents technology not as a tool of innovation but as a vessel for emotional continuity, preserving maternalism as an enduring force for healing and responsibility.

Robin's treatment is not simply medical; it is emotional and moral. As he lies still under the scanner, he begins to reconnect with his mother in ways that go beyond science. He feels her presence, her calmness, her love for animals, and her sense of wonder. This moment of emotional calm aligns with Mies and Shiva's ecofeminist theory of care as knowledge, showing that the calmness Robin feels is intellectually and ethically significant (45). Through the scan, Robin does not just calm down physically; he experiences an emotional restoration shaped by Alyssa's ethical presence. He can feel his mother, her tenderness for nature, her thoughts, her care for the environment, and similar concerns. This maternal transmission

redefines motherhood. It is not only as a biological or relational role, but as an ethical pattern of care that can be stored, retrieved, and emotionally relived across time. As Kerem Ak emphasizes, Powers does not present the therapy as a scientific marvel on its own; rather, he shows that "technology must be shaped by emotional memory and ethical care to have true healing power" (Ak 61). The therapy succeeds not because it is innovative, but because it is rooted in Alyssa's deep moral attention to life. It is a love that models what it means to care without domination, to guide without control, and to pass on ecological awareness as a lived emotional legacy.

Powers never presents technology as a solution on its own. In fact, Theo resists medicating Robin with psychoactive drugs and turns to neurofeedback as an alternative because it offers something deeper: a way for Robin to reconnect emotionally with his late mother. Rather than aiming for behavioral conformity, the therapy helps Robin restore emotional balance through his mother's ethical legacy. The therapy works because it is built on Alyssa's emotional depth. Powers seems to suggest that neurofeedback can be meaningful, but only when grounded in maternal values like empathy, gentleness, and moral attention to life. As Kanza Fatima Mirza and Rehan Ahmad observe, *Bewilderment* portrays healing through biophilia, where characters "find solace during times of turmoil by reconnecting emotionally with the natural world" (Mirza and Ahmad 78). Robin's emotional recovery mirrors this form of healing, especially as he deals with solastalgia, a form of distress experienced when one's home environment is transformed or destroyed in ways that undermine one's sense of belonging and identity (Albrecht 50). By linking maternal care, ecological grief, and emotional healing through nature, Powers proposes that the antidote to solastalgia is not innovation alone, but a return to ethical, empathetic connections with life itself.

This fusion of technology and maternalism is central to this article's thesis. It shows how Powers envisions a future where healing, both human and planetary, must come from a balance of innovation and ethics. Alyssa's presence in the machine is not cold or scientific; it is emotional, intimate, and alive. Through her brain scan, she becomes a force for comfort, for ecological awareness, and for emotional learning. Powers presents this as a model of how humans might begin to "mother the Earth" again, not through power, but through compassion preserved and passed on.

Conclusion

Through Alyssa, Powers demonstrates that science, technology, and even spirituality gain real value only when they are guided by emotional and moral practice. Alyssa teaches, even in absence, that environmental responsibility must begin with empathy, memory, and love. In Alyssa's quiet influence, Powers offers not a technical solution to these crises, but an enduring model of care, grief, and

relational resilience. This vision supports the thesis of this essay that in *Bewilderment*, Richard Powers presents maternalism as a conscious, ethical, and learned form of environmental care, by portraying maternal care as a non-biological practice that combines science, emotion, and memory into a sustainable environmental ethic. In *Bewilderment*, Powers suggests that protecting the Earth requires more than intelligence or progress. It requires conscious, learned maternalism. Alyssa's presence teaches Theo and Robin how to live with care, and through them, she mothers the world she loved. Her character is a reminder that, just as the Earth has mothered us, we too must learn to mother the Earth, with gentleness, courage, and care that lasts beyond a single lifetime.

Section Three: Powers' Vision of a New Ecofeminism

In March 1973, in the village of Reni in the Garhwal Himalayas of northern India, a group of rural women embraced trees with their bodies to stop them from being cut down. Indian ecofeminist scholar Vandana Shiva, in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, describes this maternal protest, now known as the Chipko movement, as a turning point in environmental activism. She explains that the women "stood between the trees and the axe with the affirmation that they and the trees shared a relationship of mutual life support" (*Staying Alive* 67). Their protest was rooted in care, interdependence, and spiritual connection to the land.

This same vision of maternal care appears in *The Overstory*, where Patricia Westerford devotes her life to understanding the secret lives of trees, and Olivia Vandergriff climbs and lives in the branches of an ancient redwood to protect it from destruction. These characters form relationships with the natural world through presence, humility, and commitment. Karen Warren describes this ethical stance as a shift from "arrogant perception" to "loving perception," which nurtures connection through respect and responsibility (Warren, *Ecofeminism* 9). Like the Chipko women, Powers' characters act from a sense of responsibility that grows through emotional, spiritual, and embodied care. Ecofeminist thinkers Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva describe such care as "reweaving the web" that links women, children, and the earth in a shared project of protection and survival (*Ecofeminism* 117). These examples show that environmental care becomes transformative when scientific, spiritual, and emotional practices are sustained through an ethic of care.

The Chipko women's act of becoming one with the trees and resisting environmental harm offers a meaningful starting point for understanding the kind of ecofeminism that Powers develops in his novels. Powers' women characters also merge with trees in their effort to nurse and protect them. He suggests an ecofeminism where instinct and action are guided by conscious care, making the environment part of one's ethical world.

This section builds directly on earlier findings to examine how Powers presents maternalism as an ethical foundation that integrates scientific insight, spiritual devotion, emotional presence, and technological creativity. It also considers why isolated approaches to environmental care fall short of lasting impact. Powers invites readers to see care as environmental action, showing that survival depends on respectful, enduring relationships with nonhuman life. He offers an ecofeminist vision grounded in daily attention, moral commitment, and inclusive ethics. In this model, maternal care shapes how people respond to ecological crisis and build futures rooted in responsibility and connection.

In *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*, Richard Powers presents scientific knowledge, spiritual awakening, emotional experience, and technological advancement as central elements of environmental awareness. These forces appear through his women characters, but Powers shows they become transformative only when grounded in a sustained ethic of care. This care is consciously chosen and relationally practiced.

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva explain that science and technology often become destructive when detached from ethical responsibility. They call for a regenerative approach rooted in interconnection and protection (29–30). Similarly, Karen Warren argues that environmental ethics require a shift from "arrogant perception" to "loving perception," which nurtures care and respect across difference (9). Powers builds on these ideas by presenting maternal care as the ethical foundation that unifies science, spirituality, emotion, and technology. His vision of ecofeminism unfolds through acts of care that are intentional, embodied, and morally engaged.

Through his fiction, Powers critiques scientific reasoning that separates knowledge from responsibility. In *The Overstory*, Patricia Westerford's discovery about the communicative life of trees is dismissed by the scientific community because it challenges dominant norms. This rejection allows environmental harm to continue, as commercial logging proceeds despite her insights. Carolyn Merchant calls this phenomenon "the death of nature," when mechanistic thinking replaced earlier understandings of the Earth as relational and morally alive (4, 193). Powers challenges that legacy by advocating ecological understanding rooted in attention, relationship, and moral response. In his ecofeminist vision, science restores connection rather than asserting control. It becomes a practice shaped by care.

Powers presents science as a practice that gains meaning when grounded in humility and ethical care. He shifts scientific engagement toward relationship, attention, and responsibility. Patricia Westerford's research becomes significant not only for its discoveries, but because she conducts it through patient observation and emotional presence. Later, she chooses to live among the trees to protect them. This reflects Karen Warren's "logic of care," built on trust and mutuality (15).

Warren argues that care is effective when practiced through lived relationships rather than abstract systems. Powers supports this by showing that knowledge becomes valuable when it grows through emotional commitment and ethical intention. In his ecofeminist vision, science and care work in harmony to preserve life and protect the Earth.

Powers also presents spirituality as a beginning point for ethical commitment. Spiritual experience alone is not sufficient – it must lead to physical effort and moral responsibility. Olivia Vandergriff's near-death experience awakens her to a sense of purpose, which she expresses by living in the redwood canopy to protect a sacred tree. Her care is active and deliberate. Samira Kawash explains that maternalism gains meaning when it responds to real conditions and grows through repeated acts of care (972). Powers shows that spirituality becomes maternal care when it moves from belief to sustained, embodied action.

Powers depicts emotional care as a deliberate practice rooted in grief, continuity, and quiet devotion. In *Bewilderment*, Theo channels the loss of his wife into caring for Robin, nurturing his son's emotional world while helping him connect with endangered species and the living planet. Powers shows that maternalism can arise from personal loss – not as sentiment, but as an ethical response to the need for renewal. Nurturing becomes a way to restore connection with the world and affirm one's role in it. Kawash defines maternalism as a practice shaped by experience and grounded in ethical choice (972). Warren adds that environmental ethics grow through "loving perception," a mode of care based on difference and mutual responsibility (9). Powers aligns with both, portraying emotional labor as a sustained and transformative form of care. In his vision, maternal ethics emerge through ritual, attention, and daily acts of protection.

This vision becomes clearer in how emotional care evolves into ethical practice through deliberate attention. Warren explains that ethical relationships with the environment grow from trust and shared responsibility rather than from gender or biology (15). Dorothy's care reflects this: her maternalism begins in grief and becomes a steady practice. The rhythm of her tree planting and quiet presence reveals a care that deepens over time. Alyssa, too, follows this path. Her love for animals and rituals, like recognizing birds by ear and offering blessings for all beings, become the foundation for Robin's environmental awareness. Even after her death, her legacy endures through Robin's calm and compassion, shaped by neurofeedback therapy. Powers shows that maternal care, when sustained with intention and memory, continues to guide ethical action across generations.

Powers frames environmental care as a continuous process shaped by memory, technology, and ethical attention. His vision affirms that maternal values are not tied to reproduction but grow through empathy, protection, and moral clarity. He shows that care endures when it is remembered, practiced, and passed down through generations. This form of maternalism reflects conscious intention

and ethical responsibility. Technology, too, gains value when guided by emotional meaning and moral commitment. This vision reflects what Mies and Shiva call an ethic of "care, love, and responsibility" that links generations through ecological action (161). Powers aligns with this by portraying maternal care as something lived and renewed through relationship and attention. Warren similarly argues that ethical perception arises through trust and relational depth (9). Powers builds on these ideas by showing care as a moral pattern that gives knowledge its purpose.

Through this framework, Powers defines a new form of ecofeminism. He does not present it as abstract theory, but as daily, grounded practice. He gives shape to care through responsibility and sustained attention. In his fiction, science, spirituality, emotion, and technology gain power when they respond to life with care. This is the ecofeminism Warren calls loving perception, and that Shiva connects to the maternal activism of the Chipko women. Powers presents it as a path forward which is rooted in moral vision and the everyday labor of nurturing the Earth.

A New Ecofeminism: Powers' Vision of Integrated Maternal Ethics

In *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*, Richard Powers presents care as an environmental ethic shaped by science, emotion, spirituality, and technology. These elements gain meaning when rooted in sustained ethical attention. Maternalism provides the structure through which they align into an integrated model of ecofeminism. This care grows through responsibility, continuity, and relational engagement. Powers' portrayal reflects the ethical visions of ecofeminist thinkers like Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Karen Warren, who emphasize mutuality and long-term responsibility as central to ecological care.

Mies and Shiva argue that ecological degradation stems from capitalist patriarchy, a system that prioritizes profit and control over cooperation and sustainability (13). In *Staying Alive*, Shiva proposes a relational ethic based on reciprocity and protection, supporting a life shaped by responsibility toward the living world (38). Powers engages this idea by showing how capitalist forces damage the environment. In *The Overstory*, corporate logging and legal systems destroy ancient forests and suppress ecological knowledge, as seen in Olivia's failed effort to protect the redwood. In *Bewilderment*, Theo's ethical scientific inquiry is constrained by institutional funding pressures that prioritize conformity over creative vision. Through these portrayals, Powers reveals how harm emerges when knowledge is disconnected from care and power is divorced from responsibility. His vision supports an ecofeminism grounded in moral attention and life-affirming action, where maternal care becomes a model for restoring ethical connection with the Earth.

Powers imagines environmental care as a shared process that joins science, spirituality, emotion, and technology. These forces become meaningful when

grounded in responsibility and relationship. His fiction shows that care emerges through attention and intention, and that ethics take form in lived choices shaped by presence and action. Dorothy tends a garden and plants trees in response to her longing for a child. Through nurturing plants, she experiences emotional connection and continuity – key aspects of maternal care. Patricia Westerford's lifelong research into tree communication is guided by humility, loss, and commitment. Olivia lives in the canopy of an ancient redwood, turning spiritual insight into resistance. In *Bewilderment*, Theo nurtures Robin's empathy for nonhuman life through the neurofeedback program, and Alyssa uses her hacking skills to sabotage forest-destroying companies, turning digital resistance into care grounded in protection. These stories reflect what Mies and Shiva describe as ecological partnership rooted in care and cooperation (14).

Powers also shows how systems fail when they lack ethical grounding. In *The Overstory*, Patricia's dismissal by academia, the logging industry's destruction of forests, and the government's inaction during protests reveal the dangers of scientific detachment and political delay. In *Bewilderment*, government indifference mirrors this pattern as Theo and Robin witness the erosion of ecological protection. Powers counters these failures with a model of care that grows through moral clarity and emotional presence. He places maternalism at the center of this ethical response. Patricia continues writing despite rejection. Olivia sacrifices herself to protect the redwood. Theo supports Robin's emotional bond with endangered life. These acts join knowledge with responsibility. Karen Warren's idea of care as context-sensitive and morally engaged supports this framework (24). Powers defines ecofeminism as a way of life that builds trust, sustains life, and centers relational commitment.

Powers offers a vision of ecofeminism that responds to the failures of dominant systems with an ethic of sustained care. His maternal figures do not retreat from science, emotion, or public life. They use these tools to build relationships, protect ecosystems, and carry knowledge forward across generations. Through this model, Powers shows that ecological renewal begins with ethical reorientation. He constructs ecofeminism as a living ethic shaped by responsibility, connection, and shared survival. This understanding prepares the ground for the next part of this section, which explores how maternal ethics in his fiction offer practical responses to environmental crisis.

Conclusion

This section has explored how Richard Powers, in *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*, offers a literary vision of ecofeminism grounded in maternal ethics. His fiction brings together scientific knowledge, spiritual awareness, emotional depth, and technological memory through a practice of care that grows through attention, presence, and responsibility. Powers presents maternalism as a deliberate

way of engaging the world. Each character examined in this section shows a different path into this ethic. Some respond through scientific observation, some through spiritual awakening, others through grief, memory, or relational legacy. These paths differ in origin but converge in practice. Powers affirms that environmental care takes form not through symbolic gestures or inherited roles, but through choices that are repeated, embodied, and shared.

Throughout his work, Powers imagines care as a method of ecological response. His characters build connections across time, species, and systems. Their maternalism grows in context, guided by reciprocity and shaped through daily acts. Powers draws from and contributes to ecofeminist thought by portraying care as a generative force that holds diverse knowledge together and extends it into the future. His fiction invites us to live attentively, to act with courage, and to remain committed to the lives that depend on our care.

Final Conclusion

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment* construct a literary vision of environmental care grounded in maternal ethics. In both novels, maternalism emerges as a conscious, learned practice shaped by emotional depth, scientific observation, spiritual insight, and ethical attention. Powers places women characters, Patricia Westerford, Olivia Vandergriff, Dorothy Cazaly, and Alyssa Byrne, at the center of this vision. They engage with the natural world through sustained care, ritual presence, and moral responsibility. Through these figures, Powers sketches a new ecofeminist model that unites caregiving and inquiry as mutually reinforcing practices. His maternal vision moves beyond symbolic reverence to offer an embodied ethic of environmental response.

This evolving framework links personal transformation with public responsibility, joining intimate care with intellectual engagement. Powers' maternal characters embody this synthesis through varied paths: Patricia translates science into empathy, Olivia channels spirituality into action, Dorothy nurtures life through ritual, and Alyssa turns technological skill into protection. Their practices form a foundation for activism based on attention, humility, and intention. Powers presents this integrated approach as a timely response to ecological crisis, suggesting that effective action arises from fusing care with knowledge. His work offers a new direction for ecofeminism that centers maternal values as a cultural force guiding science, emotion, and technology toward ecological renewal.

Each section of this article explores a different pathway through which maternal care generates environmental responsibility in Powers' fiction. Section One focuses on *The Overstory* and the characters of Patricia, Olivia, and Dorothy, whose engagements develop through scientific research, spiritual awakening, and emotional ritual. Their responses to ecological crisis reflect relational attention,

personal sacrifice, and long-term care. Powers presents maternalism as a cultivated ethic grounded in humility and observation, connecting environmental awareness with embodied ethical practice. Each character contributes to a broader vision of care that views the forest as both a biological and moral community.

Section Two turns to *Bewilderment* and focuses on Alyssa Byrne, whose maternal presence shapes the novel across time, emotion, and memory. Her environmental values continue to guide Theo and Robin through remembered rituals, emotional continuity, and ethically grounded technological innovation. Powers suggests that maternal care can extend beyond life, shaping ecological ethics through memory and scientific legacy.

Section Three deepens this analysis by placing Powers' portrayals in conversation with ecofeminist theory. It argues that he constructs a coherent model of care by integrating science, spirituality, emotion, and technology through maternal ethics. Together, the three sections develop a unified vision of ecofeminism rooted in sustained care and relational engagement with the living world.

This essay contributes to ecofeminist literary studies by establishing maternal ethics as a foundational principle in Powers' environmental imagination. Through close analysis of *The Overstory* and *Bewilderment*, it shows how Powers portrays women characters as agents of ecological awareness through care-centered action and ethical responsibility.

It also positions Powers' fiction within broader ecofeminist discourse by engaging scholars such as Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Karen Warren, and Samira Kawash. Their emphasis on ethical responsibility and relational awareness illuminates Powers' vision of environmental care as a moral and emotional practice. This study offers a way to read male-authored environmental fiction through the lens of maternal commitment, showing how male writers can participate meaningfully in ecofeminist thought by presenting care as an intentional ethical path.

Powers invites readers to see environmental care as a long-term practice shaped by memory and grounded in relational ethics. Maternalism functions not as biology, but as a moral stance built on attention, responsibility, and emotional continuity. Through repeated acts of care, his characters create shared ethics that link human and nonhuman life.

This vision supports a forward-looking model of ecofeminism grounded in renewal through commitment. Powers portrays ecological stewardship as a responsibility passed across generations, cultivated through humility, presence, and meaningful work. His characters affirm that environmental change begins with ethical attention and grows through persistent relationship. In this model, protection replaces control, and emotional presence becomes the source of

ecological strength. Powers offers a lasting ecofeminist ethic rooted in practiced care and collective renewal.

References

Ak, Kerem. "Book Review: *Bewilderment* by Richard Powers." *In Progress*, vol. 1, no. 2, Winter 2023, pp. 61–62.

Bracewell, Lorna, and Anna Daily. "This Is a Work for the Mothers: Strategic Maternalism against the Far Right." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2023, pp. 235–60. The University of Chicago Press, https://doi.org/10.1086/731621.

Charles, Ron. "Fresh off a Pulitzer Win for 'The Overstory,' Richard Powers Delivers Another Environmental Ode." *The Washington Post*, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/richard-powers-bewilderment/2021/09/21/d870200a-1ad9-11ec-bcb8-0cb135811007_story.html.

DeLuca, Laura. "Temporality in *The Overstory* by Richard Powers." *The Explicator*, vol. 80, no. 3–4, 2022, pp. 78–80.

Fraunhofer, Hedwig. "Multispecies Translation: Baptiste Morizot's Crisis of Sensibility, Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, and the Language of Plants." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 2024, pp. 1–23.

Gandotra, Nikita, and Shuchi Agrawal. "Sustainability, Civilization and Women – An Environmental Study of *The Overstory* by Richard Powers." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 12, no. 5, 2020, pp. 1–7. https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v12n5.rioc1s10n6.

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Kawash, Samira. "New Directions in Motherhood Studies." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2011, pp. 969–1003. The University of Chicago Press, https://doi.org/10.1086/658146.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013, p. 124.

Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. HarperOne, 1980.

Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books, 1993.

Mirza, Kanza Fatima, and Rehan Ahmad. "Solastalgia in Richard Powers' *Bewilderment*: Exploring Eco-Anxiety through a Biophilic Lens." *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2024, pp. 78–88.

Narayana, Sharmila, and Hutulu Dasai. "*Bewilderment*, by Richard Powers." *English Academy Review*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2022, pp. 131–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2022.2110176.

Onion, Rebecca. "Childhood Climate Anxiety Is a Real and Worsening Problem. So Why Can't We Take It Seriously?" *Slate*, 2021, https://slate.com/culture/2021/09/bewilderment-richard-powers-review.html.

O'Reilly, Andrea. "Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers." *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, vol. 10, no. 1–2, 2019, pp. 13–26. https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/40551.

Phillips, Mary. "Embodied Care and Planet Earth: Ecofeminism, Maternalism and Postmaternalism." *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 31, no. 90, 2016, pp. 468–485. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2016.1278153

Powers, Richard. *Bewilderment*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2021.

Powers, Richard. *The Overstory*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. Zed Books, 2016.

Starhawk. *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics*. Beacon Press, 1982.

Stearney, Lynn M. "Feminism, Ecofeminism, and the Maternal Archetype: Motherhood as a Feminine Universal." *Communication Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1994, pp. 145–59. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01463379409369923.

Vishwanathan, M. Raja, and Jismy K. Joseph. "Plant Life and Richard Powers' *The Overstory*." *Language in India*, vol. 19, no. 10, 2019, pp. 76–81.

Warren, Karen J., editor. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Indiana University Press, 1997.

Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia*. Harvard University Press, 1984.

Md Mozaffor Hossain *is an international graduate student from Bangladesh, currently studying PhD in Rhetoric and Composition in the English Department at Ohio University. He completed MA in English in the Summer of 2025 from North Dakota State University (NDSU). Before beginning his graduate study at NDSU, he completed a BA Honors in English and an MA in English Language Teaching from Rajshahi University in Bangladesh. Subsequently, he taught English Literature and Language in various universities of Bangladesh for about 12 years. His research interests include AI and Writing, Composition Pedagogy, Critical Pedagogy, Digital Rhetoric, Literary Criticism, Literary Theories, and Social Justice. He loves to read and write poems.*