

"See Below the Surface of the Waves:" Blue Anti-Human Exceptionalism in Richard Powers' Playground

Gian Maria Di Cristofaro
Università di Siena, Italy
gianmaria.dicrist@student.unisi.it

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2026.17.1.5889>



Abstract

This article analyzes the literary expression of blue anti-human exceptionalism in Richard Powers' novel *Playground* (2024). I argue that the novel deconstructs human exceptionalism, staging three parallel strategies. First, contrary to much maritime literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it focuses on the very materiality of the ocean and the vividness of submarine life, thus making oceanic life visible. Second, it humanizes oceanic organisms by comparing their attitudes to those of humans and translating their language into human-understandable terms. Moreover, the novel shows that submarine organisms are much more similar to humans than they think. For example, it highlights mantas', cuttlefishes', and sea otters' capacities for play, perception, and maternal care. At the same time, *Playground* depicts oceanic species, marked by features that make them unique. It often resorts to the ecological sublime by staging the semantic fields of amazement and incomprehensibility concerning many underwater mechanisms. In this way, the novel shows that humans cannot demand to understand any aspect of non-human life.

Keywords: Anti-human exceptionalism, blue ecocriticism, *Playground*, Richard Powers.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la expresión literaria del antiexcepcionalismo humano en la novela *Playground* (2024) de Richard Powers. Sostengo que la novela deconstruye el excepcionalismo humano al articular tres estrategias paralelas. En primer lugar, a diferencia de gran parte de la literatura marítima de los siglos diecinueve y veinte, la obra se centra en la materialidad del océano y en la vivacidad de la vida submarina, haciendo visible la vida oceánica. En segundo lugar, humaniza a los organismos oceánicos al comparar sus actitudes con las humanas y traducir su lenguaje a un lenguaje comprensible para los humanos. Además, la novela demuestra que los organismos submarinos son mucho más parecidos a los humanos de lo que se suele pensar. Por ejemplo, se enfatizan las actitudes lúdicas, perceptivas y maternas de mantarrayas, sepias y nutrias marinas. Al mismo tiempo, *Playground* representa a las especies oceánicas como portadoras de características que las hacen únicas. Con frecuencia recurre a lo sublime ecológico al poner en escena campos semánticos de asombro e incomprensión ante muchos mecanismos submarinos: de este modo, la novela muestra que los seres humanos no pueden pretender comprender todos los aspectos de la vida no humana.

Palabras clave: Antiexcepcionalismo humano, ecocrítica azul, *Playground*, Richard Powers.

Introduction

During a recent interview for the New York Public Library, the American writer Richard Powers stated that he conceives his last three novels, *The Overstory* (2018), *Bewilderment* (2021), and *Playground* (2024), as a concerto in which the first one is an allegro, the second one is a largo, and the last one, which reworks some themes and motifs from *The Overstory*, works as a closing frame. Nevertheless, he stresses that the three novels were not part of an original project and that he started conceiving them as a triptych only after writing *Playground*.

The Overstory, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2019, attempts to render readers more attentive to trees and forests, focusing on themes such as the interconnectedness between the human and vegetal world, trees' ability to communicate with one another and with other organisms surrounding them, and the endangerment of their habitats. *Bewilderment* focuses on the relationships between an astrobiologist whose wife, a lawyer specialized in animal rights defense, has recently passed away, and his son, who has been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. The boy, like his mother, is particularly concerned with issues such as animal rights and global warming and tries his best to change people's attitudes towards the imperiled environment, protesting for instance right outside the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. *Playground* does call upon some of *The Overstory's* central motifs, such as the non-human world's ability to communicate and the ever-increasing damage humans are causing to the environment, but it moves them to the ocean, thus carrying on the previous novels' environmental discourse and establishing itself as the third component of an eco-fictional triptych.

Playground is set between Makatea, an atoll in French Polynesia, and the United States. A group of tech tycoons from Silicon Valley, including Todd Keane, one of the novel's main characters, is determined to colonize Makatea to build modular floating cities to be released in the Pacific Ocean. Makatea has already been colonized during the first half of the twentieth century, due to its phosphate mines. The atoll, which only has 82 inhabitants, thus risks being colonized again by Western moguls who only want to exploit its strategic position in the Pacific Ocean. The atoll's mayor receives a call from Silicon Valley tycoons and organizes a referendum to let citizens decide whether they agree with their colonial agenda. The Californian tycoons state that their operations will not cause any environmental damage, and that the construction of modular floating cities will create new jobs for Makatea's inhabitants. This story interweaves with other stories in the novel, as in many of Powers' works. The first one is that of the aforementioned Todd Keane, a 57-year-old tech magnate who has been diagnosed with LBD. He tells the story of his life to a mysterious "you", starting from childhood, when he wants to become an oceanographer. During high school, he meets Rafi Young, an African American boy who becomes Todd's best friend because they share a strong passion for games. This passion leads Todd, who becomes a computer programmer, to create a social network in which users can compete and play with one another through ideas and observations. This social network's name is

Playground. Meanwhile, Rafi marries Ina Aroita, a Pacific Islander studying in the US, and, after arguing with Todd and breaking off their friendship, moves to Makatea. Near the end of the novel, Todd receives a letter from Ina, informing him that Rafi has passed away. Soon after, the mysterious "you" he has been addressing throughout his memoir turns out to be an artificial intelligence, to which Todd now asks to tell him "how this long match ought to end" (373). This plot twist adds a new narrative layer to the story, since readers are now aware that the sections of the novel not focused on Todd are narrated by an AI. Another tale—also AI-generated—is that of Evelyne (Evie) Beaulieu, a 92-year-old oceanographer, partly based on the scientist and diver Sylvia Earle, who is also often mentioned throughout the novel. Evie has devoted her whole life to studying oceans and non-human organisms. The book follows her brilliant career as a diver-scientist and her outstanding discoveries about oceanic non-human life, until she reaches Makatea to study the coral reef surrounding the atoll, in preparation for writing her second book on oceanic systems.

Playground has received little academic attention so far, compared to *The Overstory*, which has been the focus of critical interest since its publication. Like dendrologist Patricia Westerford in *The Overstory*, Evie Beaulieu weaves scientific knowledge and literary language to let the reader grasp layers of meaning that the sheer use of scientific prose would probably render unreachable. By describing the non-human world through an apparatus of metaphors that draw on semantic fields peculiar to the human being, Powers enacts what Bénédicte Meillon has labeled as an "ecopoetics of re-enchantment," which "sheds light on the entanglements between matter, mind, and discourse" (9). According to Meillon, ecopoetic novels such as *The Overstory* exemplify a liminal realism that "breaks the spell cast upon our bodyminds by a modern science making us believe in human separation from nature and in the inertness of the latter" (233). Both *The Overstory* and *Playground*, indeed, focus on the notion of human exceptionalism, which Powers, in an interview with Alex Clark, has defined as "this mindset that was convinced that somehow we were completely discontinuous with the rest of creation, that we were something that obeyed entirely different rules, and that had no correspondences with the living world beyond us." While the way in which *The Overstory* challenges the concept of human exceptionalism has already been the subject of critical inquiry,¹ this same idea has not yet been analyzed in *Playground*. The concept of anti-human exceptionalism in *Playground* follows two intersecting paths. The first is inhuman, while the second is non-human. Indeed, from a posthuman perspective, the sections in which the narrator is not Todd but an artificial intelligence challenge the idea of an exclusively human-oriented narrative. In fact, Serpil Oppermann maintains that, "engaging with techno-scientific reconceptualizations of life, posthumanism [...] blurs the boundaries between humans and machines, as the other-than-human agency in the posthumanist

¹ See, for instance Birat, Schoene, and Fargione.

vision is not a biological category only" ("From Posthumanism" 24). However, rather than focusing on this techno-posthuman dimension, this article turns to the second direction of anti-human exceptionalism—the non-human one—which I define as blue anti-exceptionalism—a mode of thought that decenters the human through the oceanic forces that exceed human scale, control, and epistemology.

First, I will show how Powers makes oceanic species visible. While much anglophone literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries represents the ocean as a place suitable for contemplation or a vast expanse to exploit and colonize, thus failing to consider underwater life, *Playground* foregrounds the peculiarity of individual oceanic species. Moreover, by emphasizing the sensory estrangement that diving implies, the novel challenges conventional representations of the oceans that fail to acknowledge the ocean's very materiality. Second, I will go on to outline two coexisting literary patterns in the novel: on the one hand, the tendency to depict non-human oceanic life in anthropomorphic terms, which highlights the idea that underwater life is not so different from human life. On the other hand, the emphasis is on the peculiarities of these species. By holding together these two seemingly opposed representational strategies—anthropomorphic proximity and radical alterity—*Playground* shapes submarine life through the semantic fields of awe and unknowability and stages an environmental sublime, which, according to David Nye, "is not about the triumph of human reason over natural obstacles and forces but about the ineffable complexity of nature" (Nye n.p.). I argue that Powers destabilizes the notion of human exceptionalism by balancing these two hermeneutic strategies: while bringing the non-human world closer to the human one through the use of anthropomorphic language, allowing the reader to feel closer to underwater life, Powers simultaneously alienates the reader by emphasizing the uniqueness of the non-human world.

Making the Ocean Visible: Matters of Scale

In *Blue Humanities*, Oppermann maintains that romantic and colonial imagery have largely shaped literary representations of the oceans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That is, the ocean was conceived either as a deep, infinite, mysterious place, a sublime place suitable for contemplation, or as a space to colonize and exploit, a repository of endless resources humans could use at will. Classical works like Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Joseph Conrad's *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* are built on this binary logic of the romantic/colonial ocean (6-7). According to Sidney Dobrin, "the sea-focused literary texts of the nineteenth century contribute significantly to perceptions of ocean as frontier and as sites of exploration in cultural imaginaries, often binding their tropes and rhetorics to land-based frontier mentality" (19). Colonial depictions of the ocean as a frontier are partly linked to matters of scale. In fact, cultural representations of the oceans are often connected to land-based strategies that overlook the ocean's very materiality and the fact that, as Dobrin argues, a terrestrial sense of place is quite

different from an oceanic sense of place (61). The technological shifts concerning the transportation across the oceans that took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—from sail to steam to air travel—"began to push ocean from a categorical position of natural barrier wrought with peril and awe to a place akin to a road or other space easily traversed with little attention to the space itself. This shift would distance human awareness of and attention to ocean" (Dobrin 19). Technologies like GIS and Google Ocean represent the ocean as if it were a stretch of land. By focusing on high-resolution representations of the land under the ocean, rather than on the water itself, Google Ocean, for instance, ignores the very materiality of the ocean, such as the flow of water, the fact that water is not a still body, and the degradation of light at depth. Moreover, "Google Ocean creates a visual nominalization of ocean, rendering its depiction as homogenous, consistent, and singular. Zoom into the Caribbean and the visual representation is the same as zooming into the Arctic" (119). That is to say, the local and its entanglement with larger global ecologies are erased when the view from above is used to look at the ocean.

Playground depicts this high gaze as the Californian tech magnates, including Todd, try to colonize Makatea. Todd has first heard about seasteading in 2012, when he attended a speech given by venture capitalist Peter Matthias at a conference in San Francisco after realizing he had lost control of Playground, his social network. Matthias' speech at the conference betrays his conviction that the ocean is a simple surface on which they can build the modular cities and a simple stage where humans can fully develop their potential. In addition, he speaks about the fact that the digital revolution unleashed an "incredible rash of expansion" (312) that must be carried forward, with expansion and advancement being two of the central tenets of colonialism. The Californian magnates' epistemological approach to the ocean shows the obliteration of underwater life and its peculiarities, since saltwater, in their seasteading project, is conceived only as a vast surface to co-opt, as if it were a stretch of land. Moreover, as it risks replicating the same mechanism of exploitation and extraction which has already damaged Makatea's environment a century earlier, when it was colonized by the French, the entrepreneurs' plan ultimately qualifies as a colonial stance that reinforces the conception of the ocean as a frontier.

A similarly distorted representation of the ocean also characterizes the presentation video that the Americans send to the inhabitants of Makatea, showing them what the island will look like once the seasteading project begins. The footage opens with a zoomed-out view of the planet. It gradually zooms in on the island of Makatea, where technology is expected to merge new construction with the island's original nature. The video also features modern ships transporting the modules of the new cities toward the open sea. The problem, however, is that the video is not zoomed in enough, as it fails to account for what will happen to Makatea's underwater life. Moreover, the Americans provide the inhabitants of Makatea with an artificial intelligence called Profunda, which can answer all their questions about the project. When asked about the project's environmental consequences, Profunda does not sugarcoat the facts: "it used the words 'harm' and 'damage', and it tried to put a cost,

in French Pacific francs, to the island's lost resources" (290). It transparently processes its knowledge and places it at the service of the people of Makatea. Nonetheless, "it could not see below the surface of the waves" (296). The knowledge to which Profunda has access is land-based, and creates a situated epistemology which does not take into account the abundance and the peculiarities of Makatea's submarine life. By forcing oceanic ontology into a land-based mode of thinking, this artificial intelligence fails to grasp the ocean's uniqueness.

Drawing on theories by David Abram and Edmund Husserl, Melody Jue maintains that, as terrestrial beings, humans tend to think of reality—including the ocean—"through an environmental imagination situated terrestrially" (12) that is situated and partial, rather than objective. To think of the ocean, Jue proposes an interpretive approach "within the depths rather than at the surface," (17) which considers "the ocean as an environment for thought rather than as an object of analysis or region for the study of cultural representations" (16). By using conceptual displacement and milieu-specific analysis, Jue engages with diving as a method for interpreting the ocean in literature and media studies.

Playground meets these purposes by engaging the ocean with a scale different than that of Silicon Valley's moguls. If the magnates view the ocean from above, much of the novel's diegetic action takes place underwater, following oceanographer Evie Beaulieu's dives. Thanks to her explorations, Powers manages to zoom in on the ocean's materiality, viscosity, and porosity, which the colonial gaze fails to grasp. While studying oceanography at Duke University, Evie participates in a research dive in the Coral Triangle.

At times she treaded in place, swarmed by the wildest assortment of Dr. Seuss creations—indigo, orange, silver, every color in the spectrum from piebald nudibranchs to bright, bone-white snails sporting forests of spines. The sea buoyed her, like warm silk on her bare arms and legs. She hung suspended in the middle of reefs that mounded up in pinnacles, domes, turrets, and terraces. She was a powerless angel hovering above a metropolis built by billions of architects almost too small to see. (112)

This whole passage focuses on the materiality and vitality of the ocean that a view from above cannot take into consideration. First, the description of the current buoying the young diver and its focus on the tactile experience mediated by the metaphoric silk caressing her legs account for a sense of flow and constant movement that contrasts with the stillness emerging from zoomed-out representations of the ocean. Moreover, the fact that Evie is firmly determined to get a good look at the surroundings is indicative of the turbidity of waters in oceanic depths, where light's presence tends to decline. Finally, in addition to emphasizing the bodily experience of the ocean as seen and felt from a subsurface perspective, Powers insists on the liveliness of the oceanic non-human world. In fact, he creates a powerful metaphor that describes the coral reef as a giant metropolis, with coral shapes that remind us of city buildings, designed by tiny organisms. Even if I develop the concept of anthropomorphism in the next section, I will briefly focus here on the anthropomorphic language that Powers uses to describe the coral reef. The reef,

indeed, is depicted as a giant city, and its peculiar shapes are paralleled to urban buildings. Above all, the reef's inhabitants and builders are described as tiny architects that human eyes are unable to see. By relying on human metaphors, the narrative makes complex processes more accessible to the reader while also foregrounding the agency of myriad organisms that tend to disappear from human perception when the ocean is approached at a zoomed-out scale. Thanks to Evie's dives, Powers manages to zoom in on the ocean's materiality and, above all, to account for the liveliness of submerged life and to make non-human oceanic organisms and their agencies visible. Through milieu-specific analysis, which, according to Jue, "acknowledges that specific thought forms emerge in relation to different environments" (3), Powers destabilizes the conviction of an exclusively human agency.

Moreover, the oceanographer's dives also reveal the inadequacy of human senses in grasping the complexity of underwater life. As a teenager, Evie spends two weeks diving with her father. When her brother asks her how she feels when diving, she thinks that "all her senses were deranged. Distance, color, even shape: in the bent light beneath the waves, the simplest forms defied description" (93). The narrator insists on the derangement of the sense of sight, describing Evie's visual contact with submarine species as drug-mediated experience: "on some dives, the forms were so fantastic that she wondered if nitrogen was drugging her brain" (93). Besides pointing to the human senses' inability to comprehend oceanic life, the novel also emphasizes the radical singularity of submarine species' sensory systems. In her second book, Evie writes a chapter on underwater eyes, in which she claims that in the depths, "where the light was powerless, even the world's largest eyes could not make out" (321) the incredible underwater landscapes. Nonetheless, she "[transcribes] the cacophony of underwater sounds, the grunts, groans, and honks that [are] so much more crucial to underwater life than the medium of light" (321-2). By contrasting human sense of sight—which does not work properly underwater—to non-human senses of hearing and "a jumble of other wild senses" (321), Powers emphasizes that there are sensory systems other than the human one that are capable of perceiving the reality of ocean waters more profoundly and comprehensively, thereby destabilizing the exceptionalist perspective that a superficial and zoomed-out approach to the ocean tends to preserve.

Making the Ocean Human: Anthropomorphic Depictions of Underwater Life

Besides zooming in on submarine life, Powers also focuses on multilayered representations of the oceanic system, shaped by a prose that holds together anthropomorphism and the depiction of peculiarities of underwater species. Anthropomorphism consists of the attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human beings, and it is often used as a narrative strategy to make animals or natural processes legible to human readers. Ecocritics have often problematized the use of anthropomorphism—particularly in relation to animal

representation—for its tendency to project human categories onto non-human beings (Garrard), to erase the irreducible difference of the non-human world, and to obscure the epistemological limits of human knowledge of non-human entities (Clark). Val Plumwood acknowledges that representations of non-humans' subjectivity or communication are always shaped by "a background level of anthropomorphism," which she calls "weak anthropomorphism" (57). Indeed, human representations of the non-human world are always, to some extent, filtered through human categories. According to Plumwood, however, the issue is not the amount of anthropomorphism in a representation, but whether that amount is harmful to the species being represented. Like cross-cultural representations, cross-species representations often carry the risk of colonization and assimilation—a risk that can be avoided by recognizing the differences between species and embracing translational difficulties as sources of uncertainty (60): "dealing with both human and non-human cases of translation indeterminacy requires openness to the other and careful, sensitive, and self-critical observation that actively seeks to uncover perspectival and centric biases" (60). In an interview with Jean-Yves Pellegrin, Powers reflects that science is right when warning people against resorting to anthropomorphism to preserve the empirical process' neutrality and objectivity: "in order to fully feel the whole range of potential and meaning that lies beyond the human, we do have to keep from saddling it with human analogy" ("The Art" 8). Nevertheless, he states that a small quantity of anthropomorphism can be a useful literary trick to attract readers, as they are prone to "see better what looks like them," before showing them the complexity of non-human life:

But in the sense that homeopathic medicine uses a little bit of the poison to spur a kind of immune response against larger doses of poison, I think as an artist you can develop the ability to judiciously invoke, or tease, or titillate those natural predispositions to be interested in gossipy kinds of things, you can titillate those affordances in the human psyche. There is a little bit of bait-and-switch involved here.

In her book *Clearly It Is Ocean*, Evie recalls the astonishment she felt when a gray whale she has helped to get rid of parasites recognizes her after a year:

She tried to find words for the astonishment she felt, diving near that spot the following year, when that same whale came out of nowhere and presented itself to her fingers:

He had found me again. He was asking for new help. He knew exactly who I was, a whole year later. But how? (319)

If, on the one hand, Evie describes the whale in anthropomorphic terms by attributing to him sentience that lets him recognize her after a long time and ask her for help, on the other hand, she does not equate human and non-human abilities to recognize other entities. An emphasis on the semantic fields of astonishment and unknowability highlights the character's inability to understand the whale's behavior, which is conceived as epistemologically inaccessible. In this sense, the passage exemplifies what Plumwood defines as a non-colonizing form of anthropomorphism, one that acknowledges the indeterminacy of translation and resists assimilating non-human agency into human cognitive frameworks. Alissa Kautz states that "to present the

nonhuman as more human-like can have positive effects on human-nonhuman relations" (174). Indeed, she categorizes the markers and modes used by literature to anthropomorphize non-human beings and argues that "in combination, these categories work as tools not only to identify anthropomorphic descriptions, but also to determine their inherent potential agency as offered to the humanised subject" (176). In Kautz' terms, Evie's representation of the whale is more a Manifestation of Sentience and Language (also in capital letters in Kautz's categorization)—Manifestation being a depiction of the non-human being as "an active part of the text" that shows the "Manifestation of the anthropomorphic marker(s)" (181)—rather than a mere Projection of human sentience onto the oceanic animal, since it balances anthropomorphism with the whale's peculiarity, which is inaccessible to human thought, and on which I will focus on later on in this article. This passage is not an isolated case but exemplifies a broader narrative strategy in the novel, which mitigates the risks traditionally associated with the use of anthropomorphism in challenges to human exceptionalism.

While the coexistence of anthropomorphic language and opacity addresses the epistemological risks of anthropomorphism, Powers also mobilizes anthropomorphism for its affective and imaginative potential, enabling forms of empathy and recognition that challenge human exceptionalism at an ontological level. In *The Overstory*, Patricia Westerford, one of the main characters, receives, as a gift from her father, a censored version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Moreover, she learns from him that "people see better what looks like them" (221). This sentence becomes one of the pitfalls of the novel, where trees and forests are often described anthropomorphically to prompt readers to empathize with them, and also serves as a metafictional reflection. Patricia, like Evie, is writing a book to communicate her scientific discoveries to a general audience and struggles to help people grasp the essence of trees' astonishing skills, such as their ability to communicate with one another and with other organisms, both aboveground and belowground. According to Meillon, when Patricia decides to call "giving trees" the ancient trees that real scientist Suzanne Simard calls "mother trees," "to make the miracle a little more vivid," "the anamorphic vision meant to trigger affect is superimposed upon the scientific picture" (60). That is, the empathic, anthropomorphic language chosen by Patricia—"Giving trees is something any generous person can understand or love" (Powers qtd. in Meillon 60)—overlaps with the scientific realm it aims to depict, making it more accessible to ordinary people: "Thus, we are reminded that even scientists often work alongside, if not *as*, ecopoets" (Meillon 60).

The Overstory emphasizes trees' ability to communicate and sense time, and insists on recognizing them as agents. It often describes their actions through *verba dicendi*, *verba sentiendi*,² and other verbs commonly used to refer to human actions,

² In Latin grammar, "verba dicendi" are verbs used used to introduce direct or indirect speech or to report statements, while "verba sentiendi" introduce indirect statements or express mental or sensory perception.

reducing the distance between human and vegetal life and destabilizing ontological hierarchies concerning the relationship between humans and trees. In *Playground*, Powers moves this literary device to the ocean. By using metaphorical language that parallels submarine species with humans, he prompts readers to realize that oceanic life forms are far more similar to them than they might expect. During her first dive around Makatea, Evie gets close to a coral reef and witnesses the biological phenomenon known as the Cleaning Station.

She did just that, sinking down toward the edges of the submerged seamount. Below her, an active cleaning station she called Makatea Spa teemed with more workers and clients than most successful urban businesses. Cleaner shrimp and wrasses removed the parasites, while dozens of customers waited patiently in the lobby of this combined surgery, dental office, and health resort. How a parliament of so many varied species managed to form these ad hoc, mutualistic communities Evelyne still didn't know, despite a lifetime of watching. But, gliding into the site, she could see the subtle acts of retaliation and self-policing that stabilized the rules of the win-win game. Despite occasional cheating—more by cleaners than clients—the honor system worked. Creatures that anywhere else would have ended up as prey swam unharmed into the jaws of predators who held still while being serviced, even letting the cleaners steal little bites out of them. To Evelyne's eyes, the safe boundaries of this neutral DMZ resembled the magic circle of children's play. (56)

Besides naming the cleaning and cleaned species "workers" and "clients," respectively, the narrator depicts the cleaning system first as a Spa with departments of surgery, dentistry, and wellness, then as an honor system, and finally as a demilitarized zone, which reminds Evie of children's games. Soon after, she notices a group of reef manta rays waiting for the workers to clean their bodies and observes that "every manta had a unique pattern of spots on their white underbellies, ventral patterns as distinctive as fingerprints" (56), thus carrying on the anthropomorphic language of the aforementioned passage.

Later in the novel, during a flashback to Evie's early career, she is offered to write a book about her dives. She accepts on condition that she can write a book for young adults, mainly because she wants her own children to get to know her better. One of the passages in her book describes a dive off the California coast, during which she witnessed an otter securing her baby before getting away to search for food. Evie provides a double description of the same scene. The first one consists of a more pragmatic and matter-of-fact language, relating a scientific point of view: "Once, when I was diving off the coast of Monterey, California, I watched a mother sea otter wrap her daughter in kelp before she dove down to find clams and urchins for dinner" (318-19). Nonetheless, as the oceanographer is writing a book for young adults, she knows such a language would not sensitize her readers. That is why she writes a second description in which a mother's perspective replaces pragmatism: "The scientist in me was amazed. But the mother in me just thought: *Of course. She wants to make sure that her child doesn't float away while she hunts for their dinner beneath the waves*" (319; emphasis in original). The shift from a more pragmatic language to the semantic field of motherhood enables Evie to minimize the gap between oceanic life and her readers, who feel closer to the otter thanks to their shared attitude for protective

parenthood. Powers has already followed this path in *The Overstory*, where Patricia, a well-known dendrologist, delivers a speech at a San Francisco ecology conference. During her speech she focuses on the *Tachigali Versicolor*, an Amazonian tree that only reproduces once in its whole life, and that kills itself to let its offspring grow in the dark thickness of the Amazonian forest, where they would otherwise die due to the lack of light: "the dying mother opens a hole in the canopy, and its rotting trunk enriches the soil for new seedlings. Call it the ultimate parental sacrifice. The common name for *Tachigali Versicolor* is the suicide tree" (455). Both the scene about the mother otter in *Playground* and the example of the suicide tree in *The Overstory* show Powers' use of anamorphosis, namely "a transformation—a transfiguration, or a change in the perception of forms occurring through a change in perspectives, and vice versa" (Meillon 245). In both of the episodes, the scientists, again acting as eco-poets and metafictionally reflecting on the destabilizing value of ecoliterature, draw on a precise semantic field ("mother," "child," "offspring," "parental") to let the reader change her perspective and see a human form in a non-human body. By emphasizing similarities between humans, plants, and oceanic beings, the scientists blur the barriers separating humans from non-humans. According to Meillon, in fact, eco-poetic anamorphosis offers a phenomenological/aesthetic take on our cognitive tendency to foreground human matters and, simultaneously, to background nonhuman ones. This tendency depends on an outlook trained to attribute centrality to humans by a culture stipulating a clear separation between humans and their natural "surroundings." (246)

Soon after approaching the Cleaning Station, Evie comes across a giant manta ray, "a great chevron-morph goliath she called the Loner" (57). When the huge silhouette starts blowing bubbles next to her, she realizes that it is just playing, like a child would. Evie has no more doubts that she can—and should—use anthropomorphic language to describe the animal's behavior. By insisting on the apparent parallels between human and non-human submarine life, this episode crystallizes *Playground's* challenge to human exceptionalism, reframing anthropomorphism not as a projection to be avoided, but as a contested epistemic practice. As Patricia states in *The Overstory*, "We scientists are taught never to look for ourselves in other species. So we make sure nothing looks like us! Until a short while ago, we didn't even let chimpanzees have consciousness, let alone dogs or dolphins" (453-54). Evie, who is both a scientist and a writer, thinks that it is time to turn the tide of the scientific method and stress parallels between human and non-human life:

She had spent too many decades of close observation to be cowed any longer by the prohibition against anthropomorphism. What began, centuries ago, as a healthy safeguard against projection had become an insidious contributor to human exceptionalism, the belief that nothing else on Earth was like us in any way. At her age, Evelyne Beaulieu had no more time for demure self-censorship. A good empiricist, she felt no qualms about giving the behavior in front of her a name. The way the Loner toyed with her air bubbles was clear enough. Call it what the evidence suggested. Call it what it looked like: the giant bird-like fish was playing. (59)

Despite the similarities between the two novels, Powers' use of anthropomorphism in *Playground* is not merely a blue version of the one that permeates *The Overstory*. In

an interview with John Williams, Powers has stated that, while writing *Playground*, he realized he could not write an underwater version of *The Overstory*. If trees lend themselves to anthropomorphic personalization due to humans' everyday proximity to them, oceanic beings essentially resist this process, remaining perceptually and materially inaccessible to the human world. Indeed, humans' contact with underwater life is mainly mediated. In *The Overstory*, trees are personalized—for instance, through the description of a family's relationship with a chestnut—and anthropomorphic language primarily serves as a tool for partial translation. On the one hand, trees' ability to communicate, remember, and cooperate is depicted through a metaphorical language; on the other, "Powers limns the existence of a tree language which humans might potentially be able to decipher and translate into comprehensible terms" (Meillon 222). In *Playground*, by contrast, anthropomorphism becomes a more precarious strategy. The oceanic environment resists human access, and anthropomorphic metaphors are repeatedly unsettled by moments of astonishment, epistemological uncertainty, and sensory derangement—much more than in *The Overstory*. Moreover, none of the characters is endowed with the ability to decode and translate the oceanic world's language. To conclude her book, Evie writes about a cuttlefish whose body displayed weird colors that "put her in mind of the Strip in Vegas, the scrolling Technicolor marquees of Times Square" (325) and moved as if "choreographed [...] by Martha Graham" (326). Despite recognizing that the cuttlefish's pattern must have meant something, Evie writes that she still does not know what the animal was saying.

Making the Ocean Unique: Radical Singularity and the Ecological Sublime

Playground's depiction of oceanic life forms, indeed, balances anthropomorphic language with representations of their radical singularity, like in the aforementioned passage about Evie's encounter with a whale asking for her help, where the oceanographer focuses on the whale's epistemological inaccessibility. She later recounts another moment when she was once again overtaken by mystery and amazement: before dying, a whale that had beached on the Australian coast kept on staring at her: "Something had happened that the creature could not understand, and its deep, strange eye, powered by unfathomable intelligence, stared out at her, still trying to understand, right up until its massive heart gave out" (319).

Timothy Morton, in *The Ecological Thought*, argues that "the ecological thought is the thinking of interconnectedness. [...] It's a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings" (7). Morton names "the Mesh" (15) the web where humans and non-humans intersect. Morton conceives this book as a prequel to *Ecology Without Nature*, in which he maintains that "the very idea of 'nature' which so many hold dear will have to wither away in an 'ecological' state of human society" (1), nature being barely an aesthetic concept dealing with a separation between human and non-human life that prevents people from realizing their enmeshment in what surrounds them. Building on the argument of the previous

book, Morton argues that "the mesh is vast yet intimate: there is no here or there, so everything is brought within our awareness" (40) and names "strange stranger" every life form belonging to it: "The more we analyze, the more ambiguous things become. We can't really know who is at the junctions of the mesh before we meet them. Even when we meet them, they are liable to change before our eyes, and our view of them is also labile. These beings are the strange stranger" (40). I argue that the underwater organisms described by Evie are also strange strangers, because she often locates their essence between the comforting influence of anthropomorphic language and the distance marked by the depiction of their peculiarities. On the one hand, Evie refers to the giant manta ray she calls the "Loner" as a cousin that shares some of her genetic heritage: "nothing in life matched a game of catch between cousins whose last common ancestor had lived 440 million years ago" (60). On the other, she notes that scientists still know little about "the giant oceangoers" (57). The semantic field of unknowability—"so little was known about the giant oceangoers;" "but how far they migrated and the paths they took were so much mystery (57)—even gives way to a legendary language that emphasizes the lack of information about these animals: "sailors talked about great feeding aggregations in the middle of nowhere, thousands of miles from land" (57). The manta rays are thus marked by a seeming familiarity which turns out to be unfamiliar: "The more we know them, the stranger they become" (Morton, *The Ecological* 41).

The semantic fields of wonder and unknowability, which also shape anthropomorphic depictions of oceanic life, converge in a climax when, in 1960, Evie—still a young scientist on her third mission—learns that Piccard and James have reached the deepest point of the ocean, in the Mariana Trench. The fact that they discovered life at such depths is what most upsets her and her colleagues: "Her whole life Evelyne had been taught that nothing could live so far down, under such pressure, so far from sunlight. But life was never very good at obeying human logic" (117). Although Evie is convinced that life cannot exist at such depths, she must reconsider and accept the existence of creatures that are, indeed, strange, like "wild, bizarre monsters unlike anything outside of nightmares" (117), and that "no human being knew what life on Earth really looked like" (117). Powers engages once again this alienating rhetoric about the peculiarity of submarine organisms when Evie herself recalls her diving off the ocean's depths in a submersible, "dropping miles down through a blackness blacker than outer space with no sense of direction into a kingdom so weird that it erased the line between nightmares and visions" (320). The experience unsettles her to such an extent that she begins to think the world before her, despite the efforts of science, remains unknowable, "so deep and large we may never come to know it" (320), just like strange strangers: "even if they lived with us for a thousand years, we might never know them fully" (Morton, *The Ecological* 42). Moreover, by recognizing the strange stranger's elusiveness, it becomes clear that "nature" cannot be categorized or kept at a distance, and that humans, therefore, should approach it with humility, rather than imposing dominating and colonial epistemologies on it. Powers' insistence on the opacity of underwater life

places *Playground* within a longer literary genealogy of oceanic alterity. A particularly telling precursor is *Moby-Dick*, in which Ishmael famously admits that despite all descriptive and classificatory efforts, he can only ever "go skin deep" (363) and will never truly get to know the whale. In both of the novels, oceanic animals resist epistemological access, forcing the human observer to abandon fantasies of depth, mastery, and total comprehension in favor of a humbler mode of attention.

This episode also links to what Christopher Hitt has named the "ecological sublime" (608). Starting from Edmund Burke's and Immanuel Kant's definitions of the sublime, Hitt reflects that in Kant's version, the sublime is conceived as a diachronic phenomenon that can be divided into three different steps. In the first phase, the human being encounters a natural object that the imagination cannot grasp; in the second, a gap opens between perception and cognition; in the third and final phase, reason intervenes to assert human superiority over nature (608). According to Hitt, the last phase of this diachronic process, in which reason separates the human being from nature, must be rethought in order to conceive an ecological sublime (609). As the very concept of the sublime arises from a recognition of nature's otherness, Hitt draws on theories developed by Neil Evernden and Rudolf Otto to suggest that we embrace that otherness from a non-binary perspective, to abolish the human/non-human dualism the classic sublime carries on and preserve "the radical alterity of nature while resisting its objectification and reification" (613). Evie's recognition that science and, in general, human knowledge, may not suffice to understand the strange oceanic world is, indeed, part of the ecological sublime Powers stages in *Playground*: as Hitt argues, "There will always be limits to our knowledge [...]. An ecological sublime would remind us of this lesson by restoring the wonder, the inaccessibility of wild nature. In an age of exploitation, commodification, and domination we need awe, envelopment, and transcendence" (620). The very mixture of awe and unknowability I have outlined does, in fact, shape the formation of the novel's ecological sublime. After realizing that Piccard and James have found life in the ocean's depths, Evie's amazement grows climactically:

Evelyne Beaulieu fell into the happiest sleep. Humans had seen living things seven miles underwater, in the bottommost regions of the ocean. She couldn't believe it. Life was beyond belief, beyond the capacity for belief that life itself had tinkered into being. No land-based brain could grasp the size of the experiment. Her cryptic water world was nothing but propositions, down to the bottom. (118)

Nonetheless, while, according to Hitt, "nature will always be, finally, impenetrable" (620), Powers' modulation of an ecological sublime is based on a never-ending tension between anthropomorphic features and the peculiarities of the oceanic world, in which a language concerning the semantic field of wonder encompasses both poles. Not only is this tension indicative of the epistemological inaccessibility of the non-human world, but also of its profound complexity, which, according to Lee Rozelle (2006) and David Nye (2022), stands at the core of what they call, respectively, "ecosublime" and "environmental sublime." For Rozelle, indeed, "ecosublimity can thus be thought of as the awe and terror that occurs when literary

figures experience the infinite complexity and contingency of place" (1), while for Nye the environmental sublime, in its immersive mode, "arises as an awed realization of the almost infinitely complex relations between living organisms." This kind of sublime views the landscape "as overlapping systems of relationships between geology, climate, plant and animal species, and human beings" (Nye), thus shifting humans from observers to participants entangled in natural processes made by other agentic beings. Apart from the intelligence of oceanic animals, awe also concerns the adaptation skills of submarine life. At a certain point in her career, Evie takes part in a dive off Truk Atoll, in the Pacific Ocean, to provide a magazine with pictures about the remains of the war machines sunk there during Operation Hailstone. Before the battle, the lagoons near Truk hosted only one biome, but the sunken machines created a set of caves where life managed to proliferate. Submarine life's power to endure and thrive despite technological interferences amazes Evie and her colleagues: "Every time Evelyne and her partners from the magazine dove, they came across astonishment" (239). The lagoon is so teeming with life that a brass ship's throttle is described as "some wild Miró Sculpture caked in starfish and worms" and that "the colors alone defied belief" (240). Moreover, once again Evie depicts the newborn biomes as a neighborhood made of "high-rise dwellings" (240): "even a single-person plane [...] was an intricate apartment building for kinds of life that would never have gotten a foothold without the carnage" (239). As it alternates between an anthropomorphic portrait that accounts for the agency of underwater organisms and the description of their peculiar adaptive skills, this episode can be considered environmentally sublime precisely because its wondrous language reveals the complexity of an agentic—though mysterious—world in which the human is fully enmeshed and co-responsible. While exploring the relics, indeed, Evie runs into "the remains of two sailors clutched each other underneath the eternally renewing bouquets that had sprung up on their ad hoc grave" (242). She insists on the enmeshment of human and non-human world when she notes that "thousands more dead lay scattered through this crypt, and the sea had turned them all into new experiments" (242), and that "they had become a reef" (242). While underwater life turns the dead soldiers into something new, they also become something else. It is precisely this symbiotic relationship that, according to Nye, shapes the world's complexity and the environmental sublime, and triggers restorative response: "the environmental sublime renews intimacy with the tangible world. Seeing the wounds human beings have inflicted, it embraces ambitious restoration projects and works toward ecomimesis" (n.p.).

Submission received 30 June 2025

Revised version accepted 1 March 2026

Works cited

- Birat, Kathie. "Earth Speaking Aloud: The Agency of Trees in *The Overstory* by Richard Powers." *L'Atelier*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2024, pp. 77-95.
- Clark, Alex. "I No Longer Have to Save the World: Novelist Richard Powers on Fiction and the Climate Crisis." *The Guardian*, 2024. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/sep/21/i-no-longer-have-to-save-the-world-novelist-richard-powers-on-fiction-and-the-climate-crisis?utm_source=chatgpt.com. Last accessed 15 Dec. 2025.
- Clark, Timothy. *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Dobrin, Sidney I. *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*. Routledge, 2021.
- Fargione, Daniela. "Tree Photography, Arboreal Timescapes, and the Archive in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*." *Trees in Literatures and the Arts: Humanarboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene*, edited by Carmen Concilio and Daniela Fargione. Lexington Books, 2021, pp. 245-61.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2023.
- Hitt, Christopher. "Towards an Ecological Sublime." *New Literary History*, vol. 30, 1999, pp. 603-23.
- Jue, Melodie. *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*. Duke University Press, 2020.
- Kautz, Alissa. "Humanising the Nonhuman: An Ecocritical Toolbox for Anthropomorphic Agency." *Ecozon@*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2024, pp. 173-188. <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2024.15.2.4813>.
- Meillon, Bénédicte. *Ecopoetics of Reenchantment: Liminal Realism and Poetic Echoes of the Earth*. Lexington Books, 2022.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale*. 1851. Penguin Books, 1994.
- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Harvard University Press, 2007.
- . *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Nye, David. *Seven Sublimes*. The MIT Press, 2022 (ebook).
- Oppermann, Serpil. *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge University Press, 2023.
- . "From Posthumanism to Posthuman Ecocriticism." *Relations: Beyond Anthropocentrism*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2016, pp. 23-37.
- Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, 2002.
- Powers, Richard. "Richard Powers with Marlon James: Playground | Live from NYPL." By Marlon James, *Youtube*, The New York Public Library, 9 Oct 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nmden6hVG0>. Last accessed 15 Dec, 2025.

- . "Richard Powers – *Playground* – with John Williams." Interview by John Williams, *Youtube, Politics and Prose*, 16 Oct 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5z_wZPoSglY&t=424s.
- . "The Art of Composition and Play." Interview by Jean-Yves Pellegrin. *Transatlantica, OpenEdition Journals*, 1 Nov 2023. <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/21299>. Last accessed 15 Dec. 2025.
- . *Playground*. Hutchinson Heinemann, 2024.
- . *The Overstory*. Norton and Company, 2019.
- Rozelle, Lee. *Ecosublime: Environmental Awe and Terror in from New World to Odd World*. The University of Alabama Press, 2006.
- Schoene, Berthold. "Arborealism, or Do Novels Do Trees?" *Textual Practice*, vol. 36, no. 9, 1435-1458.