

From Hero to Implicated Subject:

How the Dendro-Epic Complicates the Representation of Culpability in Deforestation



Thesis RMA Comparative Literary Studies

Utrecht University, July 2020

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Word Count: 40.012 words

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too.
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

Philip Larkin, "The Trees."

The picture on the front cover was painted by my mother, Dorien Hofenk

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Introduction

According to history's oldest known piece of fiction, one of the first enemies of humanity was the forest. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* demonstrates that stories about violence against nature are as old as literature itself. In the fifth tablet of the Standard Babylonian version of this ancient epic, the hero and his helper Enkidu encounter Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest. After entering the forest and being threatened by Humbaba, who is presented as a personification of the forest itself, the heroes take to battle. With the help of the god Shamash they manage to capture Humbaba, and after killing both him and his seven sons, the heroes cut down the cedars in the forest, including a gigantic tree that Enkidu wants to use to create a gate for the temple of Enlil. The scene of cutting down the trees is preceded by elaborate descriptions of the forest landscape—unique to Babylonian narrative poetry—that evoke a tone of the moral wrongfulness of this act of cutting them down (F. N. H. Al-Rawi and A. R. George 74). Significantly, this example demonstrates the representational power of literature, as it makes violence against nature imaginable as such. Furthermore, the fact that a personification of the forest is killed first, and only then the trees themselves are cut down, already demonstrates the complexity and common indirectness of the issue of deforestation. This form of ecological violence, which is here already portrayed as condemnable, is thus not solely represented as the seemingly simple and straightforward act of cutting down a tree.

However, in the cultural history of the forest and the role it has played in the imagination of the West, the direct violence of deforestation endures. As Robert Pogue Harrison describes in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Western civilization originally established itself in opposition to the forests. Densely forested in the past, most living places of Europe and North America were deforested or 'cleared' in order to make these unwieldy and uncontrollable spaces 'habitable'. North America and its historical connection of colonization and the building of a timber industry immediately come to mind, but as Harrison describes, the ancient city of Rome was once surrounded by vast forests as well. During the building of the Roman empire trees were viewed as obstacles "to conquest, hegemony, homogenization" (51), and consequently cut down *en masse*. However, Harrison also paints a more complex and ambivalent picture of the cultural imagination of forests when he describes that, in early literature, forests are just as well

represented as archaic, sacred, and antecedent to the human world (1). Clearly, there is a historical diversity in the way people have looked at, and written about, trees.

A similar development happens within the genre of the epic, since, just as the cultural imagination of phenomena like the forest, literary genres are also prone to change. The classic genre of the epic has long-standing major connections to hyper-visible and spectacular violence, mostly in the form of battle and warfare. Important traits of the epic, such as individual heroism and a strong sense of community make it possible to establish a logical connection between the killing of humans and the killing of trees, as happens in *Gilgamesh*. Moreover, its focus on heroism invokes a moral tone through which the meaning of the hero's actions is judged. When it comes to cutting down trees, this greatly influences whether that act is presented as grievable or laudable. However, as Adeline Johns-Putra writes, the epic form is also “changeable and indeterminate” (2). Since the genre of the epic is the oldest form of literature, it has consequently known many transformations throughout the last centuries in attempts to adapt to the demands of modern society. One of the greatest contemporary challenges that also influences what current fiction looks like, is the climate crisis. In the past few years, the term ‘Anthropocene’ has become rooted in our cultural vocabulary. Although still the subject of much debate, most people agree that this proposed designation within the Geologic Time Scale (GTS) refers to the way in which human production and consumption patterns have accelerated and started to directly impact the earth system. Since the Anthropocene as a concept has been taken up by authors and filmmakers, the term has been expanded and the presence of various environmental discourses in society has increased. As a result, public attention has also turned to the less visible dimensions of environmental violence, which also includes deforestation.

More precisely, debates surrounding the conceptualization of the Anthropocene demonstrate how the human destruction of the forest cannot be summarized in the practice of logging. There are various less direct consequences of deforestation that are also violent in their own right. First and foremost are the environmental consequences of degraded landscapes. For example, through CO₂ release after cutting down trees, deforestation contributes to the global warming that in turn threatens the entire natural world. Additionally, deforestation has major consequences for biodiversity and the general ecosystem, but also for the food base on which (indigenous) people from Brazil and over eight surrounding countries are dependent. This shows how in the longer run, humanity's impact on the environment, which is the key attribute of the Anthropocene,

will also affect the human species itself. All these practices are examples of what Rob Nixon calls ‘slow violence’: this is a form of violence that manifests itself in more gradual, subtle, and indirect ways than the immediate and explosive violence that is described in the classical epic (2). Because slow violence is not concentrated directly in a visible event, it is also more difficult to answer the successive question of who exactly is committing this violence and is to be held responsible for it. However, merely reducing the practice of deforestation to slow violence against humans would not do justice to the very concrete and visible harm that is also done to the natural environment. This malpractice therefore deserves its own specific attention as well. If anything, the lens of the Anthropocene shows how the temporal and spatial distance between the source and effects of violence by and against the environment not only complicates notions of culpability but also of who or what is suffering from (slow) violence.

In the global-scale public debate about ecological violence, it is mostly American and European investors, traders and companies in the global agribusiness demanding palm oil or soy that are held accountable for deforestation (Coca). However, as the illegal logging in the virgin forests of Romania and the bushfires in Australia show, the destruction of forests is not unique to North America or Europe, but is instead a global phenomenon. Additionally, only placing blame on these companies does not do justice to the full complexity of the issue. For example, the designation of forest reserves, even though well-intentioned, often means that other areas of the forest are singled out as acceptable to cut down. On an individual scale, narratives that place the blame for deforestation on the rural poor—caught up in a loop between being victim and perpetrator—are persistent (Rai 2). The small-scale farmers that lease land from the Brazilian government are an example of how structural practices can lead people to log trees, with all its consequences. As these cases demonstrate, traditional ways of understanding culpability and agency need to be extended if we want to adequately address deforestation—and our own role in it.

However, as the unnuanced media response to Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg shows, the insights from the academic debate surrounding the Anthropocene have not yet been translated to the larger public. Thunberg’s emotional speech at the UN Climate Action Summit, in which she held politicians and adults from preceding generations accountable for the ecological violence that has caused the current climate crisis, advocated against the inflexible discourse in the public debate surrounding accountability in ecological crisis. Most notably, Thunberg criticized their failure to take

coordinated action: “People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction. And all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!” (Thunberg). However, in the media response to speeches such as these, the focus was mostly on the negative responses of politicians such as Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and American president Donald Trump, who relied on personal attacks, for example referring to her age, in order to undermine Thunberg’s influence (Waldman). As Thunberg herself has also suggested, however, she receives these responses from politicians not because she is not taken seriously, but as a political strategy used by her opponents to divert attention from her meaningful criticism. The unwillingness of the mainstream media to dedicate much attention to Thunberg beyond the general gist of what she is saying, shows a more general unwillingness to pay attention to the complexity of culpability in this case. It is, after all, an uncomfortable task, which might explain why most journalists have avoided it so far. Most prominently, it requires of the Western consumer to look at their personal accountability.

Fiction can be an important tool to make ecological violence visible and imaginable as such, but it can do more than that. A literary approach is also well suited to delve into some of the important theoretical, conceptual, and ethical questions that are connected to the question of culpability in deforestation. Through looking at the representation of the roles of specific characters, for example, we can learn more about ways in which individuals can be indirectly connected to or implicated in deforestation. In this project, I will follow Michael Rothberg in his conceptualization of the ‘implicated subject’. Implicated subjects, in his words, are “those subjects who play crucial, but indirect roles in systems of domination and histories of harm” (Rothberg in an interview with Knittel and Forchieri 8). They benefit from such systems and histories by being aligned with power and privilege, but do not directly control them.

A good illustration that connects Rothberg’s concept to deforestation is people’s participation in a capitalist consumption culture that depends to a large extent on the clearing of forests. The beef of the cheap hamburgers so many of us often crave comes from cows, and cattle ranching is one of the largest drivers of deforestation in every Amazon country (Nepstad et al.). However, for those who think they have cleared their conscience as vegetarians, the palm oil in practically all processed foods is almost impossible to avoid (Harvey). Again, entire forests are cleared to make room for palm oil and soy bean monocultures. The consumption of these products often happens without a

second thought, even though this behavior has been affecting the environment and will continue to do so in the years to come. By illustrating these complex structures and interdependencies, literature speaks to the reader's own role in them, and to the uncomfortable realization of one's own implication. The main difficulty here lies in the invisible ways in which we can be involved in practices such as deforestation. For example, even the most environmentally oriented people like to read about green subjects in books. However, books need paper, and paper is made of trees.¹ On a larger spatio-temporal scale, the desertification of deforested landscapes which in turn leads to the global warming-exacerbating release of large quantities of soil carbon into the atmosphere (Grainger et al.), demonstrates how the effects of large scale deforestation take a long time to manifest.

The epic form is able to approach the complexity that this topic requires, because it has the narrative ability to weave together multiple viewpoints, timescales, and spaces, for example through the presence of an omniscient narrator. Its simultaneous customary wide scope, through the ambition of articulating all of the most essential aspects of a culture (Martin 17), and focus on the (war) battles of specific heroes, connects very well to the large-scale set-up required to address the impact of deforestation. However, in its classic form and with its focus on spectacular violence, supernatural interventions, and idealization of powerful heroes, the epic is not equipped to address the planetary and mundane dimensions of this representational problem. Therefore, a rethinking of the genre of the epic in the context of the Anthropocene must go hand in hand with a rethinking of traditional ideas about heroes and villains, or perpetrators and victims. How do we theorize our roles in deforestation practices that are not direct or violent? And how are we to interpret and disentangle the different problems that are bound up with a complex issue such as deforestation? Should we prioritize one aspect over the other, or are there ways to look at them simultaneously and still address them to the fullest extent? In this research project, I will provide more insight into the representational and theoretical problems surrounding the violence of deforestation. Approaching deforestation with the question of culpability in mind calls attention to the extreme scope and implications of the issue, because it is bound up with other structural inequalities. Additionally, new approaches to the question of culpability in ecological crises require an ecocritical mindset to both widen conceptions of what counts as

¹ With the exception of e-books of course. Nevertheless, the production of eReaders and tablets, just as electronic devices in general, contribute to environmental decay in their own way.

violence and complicate notions of culpability and agency, which is what this project attempts to offer.

In addition to the classical literary account of deforestation I have discussed earlier, there is, of course, a host of literary texts from many traditions and many cultures that revolve around violence against trees. Going into all of these would be beyond the scope of this project, but the history of tree novels in the Anglo-Saxon context is especially interesting, since there attention for novels about trees has recently grown the strongest. As a successor of the classical epic, modern novels such as Thomas Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and *The Woodlanders* (1887) are good examples. More recently, novels like Robin Jenkins's *The Cone Gatherers* (1955), Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964), Ursula Le Guin's *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972), Tim Gautreaux's *The Clearing* (2003) and David Adams Richards's *The Friends of Meager Fortune* (2006) demonstrate the variety within the sub-genre of 'logging fiction'. However, in the past few years, large novels that show the complexity of trees as a lifeform and focus on the violence that humanity has inflicted on them—what I from now on will call 'dendro-epics'—have become very popular. Although a fascination for the life of trees and their interaction with humans across generations is not a strictly Western phenomenon, the growing interest in fiction and popular science publications about trees in these parts of the world is currently most prominent. They have attracted recognition from literary critics that mostly read them as a response to the climate crisis (Inocencio Smith, Larman), and are slowly receiving attention from scholars in the field of Ecocriticism, who focus on their literary qualities and the way in which they provide insight into the value of trees (De Bruyn, Spengler). However, no one has yet adequately discussed how, through their focus on the systematic destruction of trees by humans, these dendro-epics also address our difficulty to grasp personal connections to this violence and, by proxy, the further implications this has for our role in general ecological destruction in times of climate crisis.

Especially in the North American context, some of these novels have a high literary status and are awarded major prizes. Keeping the potential of literature to contribute to the public debate about culpability and ecological violence in mind, I have selected three recently published novels with a wide general readership and public recognition as a result of the literary prizes they have been awarded. The three novels I will focus on in this project are Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* (2016), Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) and Michael Christie's *Greenwood* (2020). Just from reading reviews one would already be

able to discern a pattern: all of them have been labeled as ‘epics’ by critics. For example, *Barkskins* was called an “environmental epic” (Clark) in a review in *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times* referred to the novel as a “clamorous epic of environmental despoliation” (Garner). In a similar way, critics have discussed Richard Powers’s “eco-epic” (Hooper) or “climate-themed epic” (Rich). Finally, *Greenwood* has recently been placed in this classification as well, for example by the review in the *New Scientist*, which calls the novel “an unsettling epic” (Adee). Interestingly, the blurb from Christie’s publisher already refers to the novel as a “nested-ring epic”, thereby seemingly aware of a tradition that is by now slowly establishing itself: that of the environmentally aware dendro-epic. However loosely this label might have been used by critics, sometimes only meant to refer to the size of the books, I argue that there is more to be discerned than that.

Although some of the novels take on a speculative tone by imagining the future consequences of deforestation, they are realist in the sense that they base these speculations on observations about the current consequences of violence against trees. Additionally, besides their lengthiness, they are each a prime example of a dendro-epic in terms of their focus on violence and struggle, and their collection of a wide array of themes and characters. Each of the novels offers a similar approach to the topic of deforestation by encompassing a wide spatio-temporal scale, and focusing on the multi-generational span of diasporic families and their different and complex relations with trees. Structurally, each of the novels echoes the form of a tree, for example through alluding with its different segments to the cross section of a tree, sequencing them like growth rings, as happens in *Greenwood*, or by having the section titles correspond to different parts of a tree, such as ‘Roots’, ‘Trunk’, ‘Crown’, and ‘Seeds’, which is how *The Overstory* is laid out. Moreover, the narrated time of these works corresponds with the average life of a tree: around 300 years. Their tree-shaped-ness also means that characters’ storylines are often violently cut short and the long time span of these novels allows the complex implication of humans and the long-term effects of slow violence to become visible.

The three novels that I will discuss in this project have all been published in the last five years, with Annie Proulx’s *Barkskins* being the first one. The Canadian-American Proulx is a veteran in the literary world, having won several big prizes such as a PEN Award for *Postcard* (1992) and a Pulitzer Prize for *Shipping News* (1993). Her short story ‘Brokeback Mountain’ was adapted as a high-profile movie that was released in 2005 and

has since won major awards. Starting with the arrival of two Frenchmen in the woods of seventeenth-century New France, *Barkskins* tells the story of their diverse descendants, from native people forced to work in logging camps to a fierce businesswoman with a feminist drive. Proulx consistently reports of the roles they have in the simultaneous creation of North America and the destruction of ancient forests all over the world. The novel spans both continents (with a focus on the Western parts of the planet) and centuries (over three hundred years), and the text takes up more than seven hundred pages. Formally, the story follows a vertical historical line that starts in the year 1693 and ends in 2013, thereby performing the average age of a tree. Even though the novel has received a lot of praise from critics for its environmental focus, it has received criticism for its stylistic choices and has, for example, been called out for its “two-dimensionality” in *The New York Times*. However, as I will argue, the ‘flatness’ of Proulx’s characters might be a deliberate choice which allows the forest to be foregrounded. Critics have also said that “to say [*Barkskins* is] about deforestation undersells the book’s drama, blood and epic sweep” (NPR, 10 June 2016). However, this is a false opposition and I would argue that the novel being mainly about deforestation is precisely why it is a gruesome and dramatic epic.

Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* was published two years after *Barkskins* and offers a less historical but more concretely ecological perspective on trees. The novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2018 and won the Pulitzer Prize in 2019. So far, American novelist Powers has published twelve novels that have won him many awards over the course of his career. Throughout his oeuvre, Powers has often engaged with questions about the creation of knowledge and the effects of modern science and technology, and the status of art. His novels, such as *The Echo Maker* (2007), which features the workings of the brain, and *Orfeo* (2014), which depicts a pensionary composer taking up a new hobby in DNA research, explore the borders between artistic representation and scientific knowledge. *The Overstory*, in which the life and death of nine different human characters are intricately intertwined with the continuing issue of deforestation, offers an ecocritical perspective on this type of violence by “treeing” its narrative (Meinen, Yao and Herforth 44). This means that the trees in the novel operate as subjects that mediate between different spatio-temporal scales, and urge us to see their lives as an ‘overstory’ in which the history of humanity takes place. The narrated time of the novel spans 250 years and it is divided into four parts, the aforementioned

Roots, Trunk, Crown and Seeds, resembling the structure of a tree. Through its focus on trees, *The Overstory* explicitly indicates that its context is wider than human life.

Finally, triple Giller Prize-nominee Michael Christie's *Greenwood* was published in Canada in 2019, and outside of it only in 2020. It follows both *Barkskins* and *The Overstory* in environmental focus and size, explicitly presents itself as an epic, and thereby places itself in what I am calling the subgenre of the dendro-epic. Christie is a socially aware writer whose previous novels, *The Beggar's Garden* (2011) and *If I Fall, If I Die* (2015), address various societal matters such as psychiatric conditions, drug addiction, and homelessness. *Greenwood* is the first work in which he deals with environmental themes. Starting in 2038, the novel imagines how an ecological catastrophe has led to the destruction of trees, thereby displaying how deforestation can not only lead to environmental crisis, but how the reverse is also true. Adopting a multigenerational perspective, Christie's work follows a family called Greenwood from 2038 back in time to 1908, and forward again to 2038. It is both slightly speculative through its imaging of "the Great Withering" (5) in 2038, and adopts a historical perspective through its discussion of the Great Depression and especially the Dust Bowl. Even though it focuses mostly on the province of British Columbia, the novel is wide in terms of the space it traverses, discussing both trading deals in Japan and a study term at the university of Utrecht. The narrative is layered and constructed like the growth rings of an ancient redwood tree. This form is also violent: the rings of a tree can only be counted after it has been cut down. This idea corresponds with the stories that are retrospectively told about the Greenwood family members, after all but one of them have died.

Each of these epic novels explicitly frames human violence against trees as a colossal problem and encompasses a wide spatio-temporal scale to show the effects of human violence in the longer run. Due to this focus, they can be compared in the way they employ representational strategies to address human implication in violence against trees. I will employ the term 'dendro-epic' to indicate that these 21st-century realist novels adopt epic qualities but surpass strictly human affairs. By this I mean that, while they are of course modern novels, they mobilize classical epic motifs and literary devices. I will analyse how characteristics of the traditional classical epic, such as the presentation of a totalizing view, or different types of epic scenes, are used to evoke a planetary experience of space and time in which the individual human is decentred. Additionally, I will analyse how, in contrast with the traditional agency and intentionality of the classical epic hero, these novels present characters who are not aware of the consequences of

their actions, and often do not even intend these consequences to happen. This helps to provide insight into the way in which implication in ecological crises functions. A close reading of the texts, in which I will select three characters and discuss their implication, will identify the different ways in which people can be implicated in violence against trees. Finally, through a comparison of my three case studies I will be able to not only identify their similarities as dendro-epics, but also gain more insight into the diversity of implication through focusing on their differences.

In my approach, I will be combining perspectives from Genre Studies with theories and concepts from the fields of Ecocriticism, Postcolonial Studies and Cultural Memory Studies. These three fields have a long history of interaction with each other. In the *New Literary History* journal, Dipesh Chakrabarty has written about the challenge that climate change poses to the field of Postcolonial Studies, thereby connecting the latter field with the field of Ecocriticism. A special issue of *Textual Practice* on planetary memory, which rethinks the role of memory in the Anthropocene, contains contributions by Pieter Vermeulen, Richard Crownshaw and Claire Colebrook, who all connect the fields of Cultural Memory Studies and Ecocriticism. It is in the intersection of the fields of Postcolonial Studies and Cultural Memory Studies that concepts such as Michael Rothberg's multidirectional memory and the implicated subject, or Rob Nixon's slow violence originate. These ideas will form the theoretical framework of my thesis. Finally, the question of how precisely *Barkskins*, *The Overstory* and *Greenwood* offer a new and environmentalist take on the traditional genre of the epic is theorized through debates surrounding transformations of the novel in the Anthropocene. By understanding genres as historically variable categories, I will create a space for ideas about the role of literature in the Anthropocene. Most importantly, I will analyze how this geological epoch inspires the authors of novels such as *Barkskins*, *The Overstory* and *Greenwood* to look back to the classical epic, but also to advance it. The point here is not necessarily to establish a set of fixed criteria in which to place these novels, but to define a set of distinguishable characteristics to work with. Consequently, this leads to the blurring of the strict and artificial separation of the epic and the novel.

After delineating a theoretical framework that combines insights from the aforementioned fields, I will relate these understandings to my case studies. My primary focus in this project will be the specific question of how and to what extent *Barkskins*, *The Overstory*, and *Greenwood* present themselves as dendro-epics and, subsequently, how this presentation allows them to make human implication in violence against the

environment imaginable as such, and to complicate simplistic questions about culpability in a time of ecological crisis. This, in turn will allow us to ask about the potential of 21st century transformations of the traditional epic genre to progress the public debate about culpability in ecological crisis beyond its present status quo. In order to answer this broader question, I will first focus on what these works of fiction have in common and how they can be interpreted as references to, and contemporary transformations of, the classical epic. Following this, I will conduct my analysis of the novels with the help of a more specific question. By looking at the ways in which notions of ecological violence and its effects are thematized and addressed in the analyzed novels, I will pay attention to how they make the reality of implication and complicity understandable. The outcome of this analysis should be an overview of how literature, and specifically the dendro-epic, offers a more complex and comprehensive way of thinking about (slow) violence and culpability in relation to deforestation.

More specifically, I will be looking at definitions of the epic, and in particular the shift in the conceptualization of the epic hero, which has always been one of the genre's central features. In the classical and prehumanist epic, the heroic position is a paradoxical one. On the one hand, the protagonists are portrayed as warriors. As Adeline Johns-Putra argues, they are defined by their "proximity to death" (25), both in their roles as killer and in the risk they take of being killed. This makes the heroic position a vulnerable one. Heroes, with a reputation in war battles that justifies their status as half-gods, are simultaneously influenced by the threat of mortality that disputes this status. As D.C. Feeney argues, gods in the classical epic function as literary vehicles (46), but also as characters not unlike the human ones. The anthropomorphic deities add a mythical element to the classical epic that evokes a sense of fate.

More contemporary and often humanist adaptations of the epic form, such as the type that Franco Moretti defines in *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez*, offer a hero in the form of a rational human subject. Because they cannot meet the requirements of the totalizing will of the epic, they are often described as anti-heroes. However, as Stephen Kern describes, the new kind of hero in the modernist novel is never just anti, but rather neo-heroic (34), like in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1992). This means that they define their heroism not in terms of the battles they have won, but rather as a heroism of the self. Realist novels, while sharing the rebellious nature of modernism, also offer heroes that are everyday people with character flaws. Their ability to navigate difficult situations with calm and grace is what makes them heroes. As Johns-Putra

argues, “the polyvalence of subjectivity is, in the twentieth century, the defining characteristic of the epic” (8). Moretti discusses that this focus on subjectivity leads to a tension between the individualism as embodied in for example the stream of consciousness of James Joyce’s Leopold Bloom, and an encyclopedic drive towards a larger totality that is no longer fully believed in. The modern epic hero, more so than its classical predecessor, is an individual. However, this individualism proves to be problematic when one wants to capture ecological problems that surpass the individual scale.

In *The Great Derangement* (2016) Amitav Ghosh has famously argued why the contemporary realist novel, with its focus on the emotions of the individual and details of the everyday, has failed to address ecological crises adequately. Ghosh suggests that most literature entertains a mode of concealment that prevents people from recognizing the reality of the current ecological crisis. Also responding to phenomena like global warming and the challenges it poses to the novel as a form, scholars from the field of Ecocriticism such as Timothy Clark and Pieter Vermeulen have written about a shift in the contemporary novel from a focus on the individual, to not just an extension of the scope of the literary imagination, but an upscaling beyond the scale of human life to dimensions of biological or geological time. One of the recent ecocritical works that most explicitly and relevantly deals with the role of literature in representing events that happen on different spatial and temporal scales is Clark’s *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015). In this literature-focused expansion of Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects* (2013), Clark argues that the Anthropocene can only really be understood on a global spatial-temporal scale which transcends the level of the individual by multiple steps.

This notion of ‘scaling up’ also reflects the debate about deep time and the transnational between Mark McGurl and Wai Chee Dimock in *Critical Inquiry*. McGurl, responding to Dimock’s work on the ‘deep time’ of literary history, argues for a new type of realist literary work that both represents global connectivity and—in a move against anthropocentrism—an inevitable cosmic or planetary indifference. In her own response, Dimock proposes the ‘low epic’ as a specific form of the epic that she deems capacious enough to deal with the question of scale in the Anthropocene. Finally, McGurl responds to Dimock again by stating his reservations about the toxic forms of individualism of the modernist epic hero. He does not reject Dimock’s concept of the low epic, but stresses how literature must most of all be taken as a scaling device that scales up and down as

needed (634). In this line, the dendro-epic both connects storylines that are widespread on a spatio-temporal scale and, through its focus on the perspective of trees, adds an awareness of planetary indifference towards human affairs. As a result, the dendro-epic offers a further development of the novel that harks back to the epic. However, the hero role gets split up into many different positions, where humans have less agency.

Writing about a planetary scale and agency, Clark illustrates why it is necessary to move beyond thinking about seemingly non-environmental issues like colonization as a purely human action-based affair, but instead perceive them as a matter between species (123). Following this point, Clark makes the ecocritical argument that self-idolizing all-encompassing notions of human agency must be let go of, because environmental history is caused by a plural web of human and non-human influences alike (127). On a similar note, and building on the works of Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, historian Philip Howell proposes the concept of assembled agency. With this theory he points out how agency can be an emergent effect of the interaction between various agents (207). This connects with the idea that human action can trigger processes that lead to environmental crises, in which, in turn, humans have limited influence. For example, cutting down trees activates a chain of events, in which the environment gains a form of destructive agency that goes beyond human control. Through acknowledging the agency of other species and also taking responsibility for our own actions, it can become clear how humans are vulnerable to a network of human and non-human matters and agencies, but also how this network implicates humans in extreme violence. By both taking into account the vast spatio-temporal context of climate change, but also the specific context of a narrative, both the individual and the global dimensions of environmental can be considered. This also prevents the risk of reading textual events as solely on the global scale, which could possibly lead to a representation of humans as merely tools in a network of large-scale ecological, sociological and material events.

In order to theorize further how to discuss the various causes and consequences of deforestation on a non-hierarchical basis, I will be working with one of the most adopted concepts from the fields of Holocaust and memory studies in recent years, which is Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectionality. He employs a comparative and interdisciplinary approach to theorize the way in which to approach the relationship between the histories of victimization that belong to different social groups (2). The main theoretical contribution of Rothberg's book is his explanation of how approaching events multidirectionally makes multiple simultaneous non-competitive modes of remembrance

possible. Through this, his concept is particularly useful for thinking about a non-anthropocentric multidirectional form of memory that demonstrates the different histories of victimization as a result of deforestation without prioritizing one over the other. However, since I not only discuss the positions of victimization, but also of culpability that are connected to deforestation, I will also consider Rothberg's more recent monograph.

In *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (2019), Rothberg proposes the use of his term 'implicated subject' in the sense that the Euro-American community of the global North benefits from a system that generates a diverse range of traumatic experiences (xvii). Rothberg primarily explains his concept in human contexts such as racism and social inequality as a result of difficult histories in which we are implicated. An example of this is the idea that the long history of slavery has given white members of the Western society the privileged position they currently entertain. Following this, Rothberg argues that problems of a planetary scale and temporality, such as inequality or climate change, displace the positions of victim and perpetrator. In his recent work Rothberg has also applied the concept to other pressing issues such as globalized industrial production. He shows how capitalist societies are structured through issues of (slow) violence because the entire community is under the influence of fossil-fueled capitalism (xvi). This example also demonstrates how these Western societies can become perpetrators of violence against the global South. Based on this insight Rothberg further nuances his argument and explains how the idea that all members of humanity are implicated in these large-scale issues—since there is no way out of implication—does not mean that they are all evenly implicated. He introduces the model of complex implication to refer to cases where people occupy multiple subject positions of implication, victimization and perpetration at the same time.

To enrich Rothberg's discussion of implication that focuses primarily on human affairs, I will turn to the field of posthumanism, that has recently also started to respond to some of the shortcomings of 'humanist' memory and genocide studies. Nathan Snaza argues that it is no longer reasonable to draw the limit at intra-human forms of violence. Using Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory, Snaza explains the uses and functionalities of reading colonial encounters as biopolitical events. By multidirectionally linking climate change to other inequalities and injustices, such as the displacement of people on the coastlines of Southeast Asia, it becomes clear how people can be unevenly implicated in the issue of climate change. In another article in the *Journal of Perpetrator*

Research Snaza further expands the environmental theoretical possibilities of the concept of the implicated subject. He does so by analyzing how academics, through the book publishing industry, are implicated in settler-colonialism and ecological extraction. In his contribution to the first Perpetrator Studies handbook, Richard Crownshaw argues how, in the context of the Anthropocene it is important to look beyond the perspective of the direct perpetrator, and thus make the way in which human agency activates the non-human world visible. However, Crownshaw offers neither an in-depth analysis of the unevenness and inequalities that are part of complex implication and the slow violence of deforestation, nor the role that 21st century large realist literature can play in providing insight into these issues. A more complete analysis must be made of culpability in cases of deforestation that include human as well as non-human agents.

In order to produce such an inclusive view, this thesis looks at the multiple layers of the dendro-epic in which both the causes and effects of such ecological destruction are demonstrated. The project does so in order to provide more insight into our personal roles in the violence of deforestation. By analyzing all these dimensions, it becomes clear how 21st-century reimaginings of the classical epic form can both identify the ecological implications of deforestation and adequately address the different histories of implicatedness within human communities. In order to arrive at such an analysis of how the dendro-epic makes implication in deforestation understandable, the first chapter of this thesis discusses the key concepts and the theoretical framework in more detail. In this chapter, I look at theories that address the intersection between Collective Violence Studies, Memory Studies, Postcolonial Studies and Ecocriticism to find out how traditional ways of understanding culpability can be extended by looking at the structural inequalities and implicated subject positions inherent in the social-natural problem of deforestation. This framework should provide a solid foundation for a further analysis of the novels that are central in this project. In the second chapter, I will turn to how these literary works transform the genre of the epic in order to make ecological violence and implicated subject positions imaginable as such. More specifically, in this chapter I will zoom in on characteristics of the epic that, when used in an Anthropocene context, offer a widened experience of time and space. This, in turn, can offer a way into thinking about violence of which the consequences are indirect, and help to make it more visible. In the third and final chapter I will emphasize the intricacies of these three novels and focus on how they refigure traditional ideas about agency, intentionality and the epic hero. I will close read certain passages to demonstrate how these novels provide greater insight into

the uncomfortable implicated subject position, and discuss how they approach this issue in different ways.

By putting these stories into a comparative perspective, this project shows how under the influence of Anthropocene thinking, classic genres such as the epic can regain a surprising relevance. By analyzing the works of Proulx, Powers and Christie as epics, I demonstrate how they are not solely inventing new literary techniques, but are in fact reinterpreting and reusing the themes and forms—such as violence and large-scale conflicts—of one of the oldest genres to address current issues such as deforestation. Therefore, this thesis not only shows the transformation of the epic under the influence of new themes, but also demonstrates a central thread throughout history; the recent fascination with the literary representation of deforestation and climate change in general is in fact not solely contemporary. Human relationships with the forests surrounding us—whether violently or harmoniously—have always engaged us. Since fiction that shows the complexity of trees as a lifeform is rapidly gaining popularity, it is important to analyze their potential of reaching out to people with many different backgrounds. A study of how these literary works confront their readers with the systematic destruction of trees by humans, demonstrates how they open up and make imaginable the discussion about people's personal roles in these types of violence.

Approaching this topic through the lens of literature is essential because it allows us to reflect on the implications of the act of reading itself, and our material entanglement with practices of deforestation through using paper made from trees. So, finally, a larger dilemma that needs confronting is the materiality of the epic novel. 'Epic' has the connotation of 'large', and my epic case studies are each 500+-page novels which contain a lot of paper. By writing and reading 'big books,' these authors and us, their readers, are implicated in deforestation. As these novels show, though, 'big books' are also needed to tell the long history of the relationship between humans and their environment. What does it mean for us readers? Can we still read these books as long as we address and confront our implication in the violence connected to their production, or do we also need to act upon that implication? If so, should we find other ways to consume literature? By raising these questions, finally, this project could also provide a point of departure for a reflection on the status of reading in times of environmental crisis.

Chapter I

Trouble in the Forest

Extending Traditional Ways of Understanding Culpability

The conceptualization of our current era as the Anthropocene presents a problem for thinking about violence, responsibility, agency, and causality. Since human history and natural/geological history are becoming increasingly entangled with the human species leaving an impact on the Earth's geological record, not all human action can simply be understood within either the 100-year time frame of a few generations, nor on an individual or even national scale. A recalibration of violence seen solely as direct and intentional is required to understand how the cutting down of trees can be harmful for both the human species and the environment itself in the longer run. Furthermore, the universalizing tendency to view all of humanity as a species with destructive agency in the Anthropocene clashes with the social-political critique that addresses the differences between local communities, which shows why it is necessary to develop an extended notion of responsibility.

In the field of (Collective) Violence Studies, scholars often shy away from addressing the real (structural) violence against the environment, perhaps out of a fear of downplaying human troubles, and thus conceptualize violence strictly in human terms. If violence against the environment is mentioned at all, it is often to discuss the unequal distribution of harm over different local human communities. Reversely, ecocritical writing that does problematize the violence against the natural environment offers no full account of the ways in which humans are also (unequally) harmed by it. This seeming inability to represent the violent consequences of environmental harm non-reductively is especially problematic in the case of deforestation, which is both directly harmful through cutting down trees and threatening the life of forest rangers, and indirectly harmful through displacing human communities and impoverishing landscapes. In this chapter, I will trace some of the developments in thinking about violence by and against the environment, and see how both humanity's general position, as well as the (implicated) position of individuals, in this violence has been theorized so far. Moreover, I will reflect on literature's ability to solve representational challenges and make the

invisible imaginable. In chapter two, where I further explain my conceptualization of the dendro-epic, I will discuss the operationalization of this in a more in-depth manner.

Conceptualizing Violence in the Anthropocene

The bloody and battle-like depiction of violence in the classical epic seems to have determined how violence is viewed in the Western world. When I look up ‘violence’ in the *Thesaurus*, some of the synonyms that come up are assault, attack, bloodshed, brutality, and clash.² These terms are exemplary for our conventional definitions of violence as a highly visible act, one that is “event focused, time bound, and body bound” (Nixon 3). These are also the types of violence that the fields of Genocide Studies, Perpetrator Studies, and Collective Violence Studies have traditionally been looking at. Spectacular violence, as Nixon defines it, is the kind that we are most used to: the mediagenic and sensational violent actions that attract our attention. However, these descriptions do not encompass the entirety of the harm that humans inflict on both each other and their environment. The last few decades have known an emergence of new conceptualizations that move beyond spectacular to more structural accounts of violence, which originate from other theories in the fields of Violence and Peace Studies. These are often quite anthropocentric theories, but they have to be explained in order to understand the subsequent theories that do concern trees.

The first step towards theorizing a broadened understanding of violence was taken by the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung in 1969. In a seminal essay about definitions of violence and peace, the so-called ‘father of peace studies’ defines peace as the absence of violence. He readily rejects the narrow definition of violence as a physical type of harm caused by a sole actor who intends this harm to be the consequence of its actions. This is especially important, he argues, because in that event profoundly unacceptable social orders would in an accompanying definition of peace still be acceptable (168). Galtung maintains that if there is no subject committing direct violence, we can speak of structural or indirect violence (170). This type of violence, which is built into a social structure, reveals itself as people having unequal power and life chances,

² Terms such as ‘bloodshed’ demonstrate how violence is here primarily associated with humans and animals, since trees, of course, can’t bleed.

especially when there is an avoidable prevention of them meeting their basic needs.

Galtung suggests that this kind of violence is often invisible (172).³

Galtung makes the distinction between personal and structural violence into his fundament, thereby demonstrating why they are equally valid as a form of violence. Continuing, in order not to exhaust the term violence, he chooses to discuss the case of structural violence as 'social injustice'. (171). He seems to be avoiding his commitment to the term violence here, most likely because social injustice is a convenient substitute that allows him to refrain from merely relying on the technical definition of structural violence. Moreover, social injustice is a legitimate term in this context because, just like social injustice or oppression, structural violence is able to account for the fact that people are affected differently by various social structures. However, scholars like philosopher Mark Vorobej and psychiatrist and international violence expert Bandy X. Lee have advocated for a consistent use of the term violence in order to do justice to the magnitude of damage connected to it, and the way in which that can be corrected by human decisions. I would also argue that the mixing up of these terms is not entirely harmless. A consistent referral to structural violence as a form of violence, enables non-competitive comparison. However, referring to personal violence as violence, but to structural violence as social injustice, primarily stresses how they are different. Moreover, referring to something as an injustice also abstrahizes it and takes away the idea of agency more readily than the idea of violence.

In later work, Galtung has extended his theory of structural violence by introducing the notion of cultural violence. This has led to a three-part classification of violence, involving personal, structural, and cultural violence, that has become a research paradigm in the field of Peace Studies. With the concept of cultural violence, Galtung means to address "any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form" (292). Examples of these aspects are religion, art, and empirical and formal science. If we highlight the aspect of art, of which literature is an important part, we see how the epic genre can work to glorify violence. In his argument Galtung focuses on culture and its various components in general. However, if we focus on art specifically, we see that he does not address how literature offers a dialogue between

³ Galtung develops this idea further by making a distinction between manifest and latent violence, thereby suggesting that structural violence is often invisible, but there are several influences that shape it. True for both personal and structural violence, latency indicates a situation that is so unstable that the actualization of violence is a logical consequence.

the author, artwork and the reader. Therefore, the latter also holds a responsibility to resist the legitimization of violence in literature. Therefore, if art, and by extension culture, can legitimize violence, they reversely also open up the space to problematize it.

Outside the field of Peace Studies, the concept of structural violence has been taken up by fields such as Violence Studies. In response to Galtung, Lee defines structural violence as “the avoidable limitations that society places on groups of people that constrain them from meeting their basic needs and achieving the quality of life that would otherwise be possible” (123), and holds that these forms of violence are often subtle and accepted as a matter of course. They may seem as nothing more than general life difficulties because the limitations they impose are embedded within social structures. Moreover, Lee argues, this invisibility makes it extremely difficult to assign culpability for this violence, since actors have often either disappeared or are hiding behind anonymous institutions, making it impossible to identify them (124). The influential American anthropologist Paul Farmer further extends this idea by conceptualizing the defining structure of structural violence as a pattern of collective social actions (47). Since all members of a given social order indirectly apply these patterns, no individual is completely at fault, while simultaneously everyone in that particular order is partially at fault for the exertion of structural violence.

At this point, it is important to note that most of the fields studying violence, such as Peace Studies and Violence Studies, have customarily focused on the study of violence exclusively as inflicted by and upon humans. This makes them—and subsequently the more specified fields related to them, such as Holocaust and Genocide Studies—a highly anthropocentric set of fields. Even when violence against the environment is addressed, as happens in Lee’s work, the focus is repeatedly on the harmful repercussions for humans. Offering a further specification of structural violence, Lee connects the concept to ecological forms of violence by zooming in on environmental and nuclear violence. Her definition of environmental violence is quite inclusive, encompassing any type of violence that people inflict on each other with a cause or effect in the environment. It includes both the direct damage people do to the environment and the violent response from the natural world itself as a result of human degradation of the environment (143).⁴

⁴ Placing this into a model, Lee makes a distinction between primary, secondary, and tertiary violence in the context of the environment. The first type indicates the violence that humans inflict on nature, the second type indicates the subsequent reaction of the natural world to this degradation, and the third type indicates violence between people over natural resources or environmental policy (144).

Furthermore, she argues that environmental violence is not site-specific, but both local and global in its impact (145). Lee continues her argument by focusing on the effects that environmental degradation has for humans and focuses on both direct consequences, such as a diminished food production, and indirect consequences, such as mass migrations. She states that power, especially the unequal distribution thereof, is the main source of environmental violence.

Albeit offering an inclusive view compared to some of her colleagues, Lee still offers an anthropocentric vision on environmental violence. She continually stresses that environmental damage is a human issue because our survival as a species is at stake. However, even though we might want to focus on our personal survival as members of the human species, it is important to consider that environmental violence in the sense of violence against, not only through, the environment is a harmful reality. Significantly, Lee does not write in an in-depth manner about the effects that environmental violence has on the natural world itself.⁵ This omission matters, because there is a difference between human violence against the environment, which includes both humans and non-humans, and the deferred violence that humans inflict on each other by harming their natural environment. It is primarily the former type that I am interested in while exploring the context of deforestation, because this inclusive viewpoint allows us to address the full extent of how this practice is harmful. Therefore, I we want to avoid an exclusively anthropocentric discussion of environmental violence, the academic fields that deal with the analysis of violence need to address the environment as something that can also be harmed.⁶

⁵ Lee briefly discusses deforestation in this light. For instance, she hints at the entanglement of violence against humans and the natural world in her example of illegal logging. This source of environmental violence, in its irreparable degradation to forests, endangers both animal species and local inhabitants. As a more indirect form of violence related to deforestation, Lee raises the killing of hundreds of forest activists and rangers in illegal logging related violence (151).

⁶ Besides Lee and Nixon, the latter of whom I will discuss later in this chapter, other scholars have written about ecological violence. Mark Levene discusses the impact of climate change on possible scenarios of genocide. He makes a plea for a broader contextualization of possible preconditions for genocide that take into account the effects of a quickly changing environment. In the field of Peace Studies, Randall Amster's *Peace Ecology* consolidates the eponymous emerging paradigm that stresses how issues of peace and nonviolence are inseparable from environmentalism and sustainability. Amster stresses the links between collective violence and environmental degradation and discusses the rights of non-human species not to be treated as separate political agendas. Instead, Amster maintains, concerns about human rights and non-human rights must be imagined as interconnected.

By explicitly dealing with the causes of ecological violence, the field of Postcolonial Studies has offered valuable new insights. In *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*, literary scholar Cajetan Iheka discusses African literary responses to the environmental degradation of the African continent. He challenges the conceptualization of environmental problems that focus primarily on humans, and argues that his case studies instead offer an “aesthetics of proximity” (23) that showcase the interconnectedness of human and non-human lives. This rethinking of human-non-human relationships in turn, Iheka argues, works to challenge the anthropocentric position that normalizes ecological violence (5). Iheka’s analysis of an aesthetics of proximity is in line with Nixon’s discussion about ways to make slow violence imaginable. Nixon writes from both the fields of Postcolonial and Environmental Studies and develops the idea that there are certain forms of violence, especially ecological ones, that manifest themselves in more gradual and subtle ways. Not all forms of violence can be related to a directly visible event, or are immediate and exposive, Nixon holds (3). In the case of ecological violence, more visible environmental catastrophes such as tornadoes and erupting volcanoes do not encompass the full extent of environmental crisis. By introducing the concept of slow violence, Nixon offers an opportunity to make imaginable incremental and therefore less visible forms of violence, such as acidifying oceans and deforestation, of which the harmful repercussions go on for years, decades, or even centuries.

Writing in the context of possible transformations of Postcolonial Studies, Nixon has specifically discussed the incremental violence of deforestation. Referring to Kenya’s illicit deforestation and Wangari Maathai’s Green Belt Movement that offers a possible solution to this, he states how the felling of trees does not pose a sudden threat but is pervasively injurious to the long-term human and environmental prospects (588). Nixon identifies deforestation as a local form of slow violence that results in the desertification of great parts of the country. This desertification in turn also leads to large (political) conflicts that can last for decades, and human catastrophes like malnutrition, and this demonstrates how cutting down trees can be a catalyst for incremental violence. Additionally, Nixon describes how deforestation can be viewed as a highly charged political act, since trees often function as symbols for something else that is then destroyed. For example, North American colonists viewed tree felling as an act of progress that both helped them acquire land of their own and simultaneously helped

improve the land. This example demonstrates how slow violence is obscured by alternative narratives.

Driven by postcolonial concerns, Nixon maintains that impacts of slow violence such as global warming are unequally distributed across the globe. Moreover, the problems and activist responses of people in the global South often get ignored specifically because of the invisibility of slow violence. Nixon discusses how various personal and global concerns often get mixed up, and how poorness greatly affects possibilities for and ways of environmental activism. Most importantly, those activists experience the climate crisis not as a planetary abstraction, as many Western activists often do, but as a set of inhabited risks, some more concrete and some more obscure and long-term. My project focuses on North American accounts of deforestation, and the novelists I discuss are not poor or from the global south, nor are their novels. As a result, the connection with postcolonial theory and activism might not be directly obvious. However, Canada and the United States are postcolonial countries with deep structures of inequality, which is—either directly or indirectly—addressed by Proulx, Powers and Christie. Moreover, their novels feature poor and indigenous characters, and thematize both environmental movements and activist resistance. The resulting representation of deforestation as a global or even planetary problem also affects the reader, because they can no longer put off these issues as happening somewhere else.

As Nixon foregrounds, for various reasons, slow violence is still not addressed sufficiently by both the media and society in general. He compares his notion of slow violence to Galtung's structural violence and argues that Galtung's conception of structural violence is static, but slow violence is continuous, although in a gradual sense (11). Slow violence is not merely an instance of imperceptible violence, but also of imperceptible change. In this light, Nixon stresses the importance of seeing environmental violence as a contest not only over space, bodies, labor, or resources, but also over time (8). The delayed effects of the slow erosions of environmental justice pose an even greater challenge to us, Nixon argues, because we find ourselves in an age of turbo-capitalism. Our experience of time has changed due to time-saving technology that simultaneously evokes the feeling of not having enough time. Consequently, the present starts to feel more and more abbreviated (8). Slow violence should be targeted by long-term preventative or remedial environmental legislation, but political leaders do not prioritize such legislation because the results, and especially the political rewards of their

actions, will only reveal themselves decades or centuries from now (9). As a result, environmental action is perceived as critical, but not urgent.

One of the core aspects of Nixon's conceptualization of slow violence is the idea that the temporal dispersion of this type of violence presents major representational challenges (3). Subsequently, he discusses different aesthetic strategies that are capable of responding to these challenges. In an essay for *Modern Fiction Studies*, Nixon addresses the representational bias against slow violence and argues that the high regards of contemporary media for instant spectacle mean that insidious forms of violence with their lack of special effects struggle to maintain a media focus (445). Nixon argues that in order to confront slow violence, it is required to give figurative shape to the formless threats and fatal repercussions that are dispersed across space and time (*Slow Violence* 10). He states that a move beyond event-centered representations of violence is required (39), which is where a role is carved out for the question of genre—and thus also that of the dendro-epic. Nixon argues that some of the most powerful transnational environmental writing has arisen at the “transit points” (32) in the form of genres that mediate between global, national and local and their reversible hierarchy. Subsequently, Nixon argues for the essential role of non-fictional accounts, especially of ‘the poor’, in addressing (slow) environmental violence.

However, taking into consideration the imaginative challenges that the violence of deforestation offers, it is also valid to explore the representational abilities of fiction. In *The Value of Ecocriticism* (2019), Timothy Clark argues that realist fiction can solve the representational challenges that Nixon addresses. He discusses the idea of a literature as a public witness that is “free to trace all imaginable scenarios and to survey how prejudice, personal background, cultural assumptions, scientific research and the complacencies of day-to-day life all form part of how people engage or evade environmental questions” (78). This all-encompassing mode works against the tendency of the media to represent (ecological) violence one-dimensionally. More specifically, Clark discusses how a new approach to world literature, inspired by the field of Postcolonial Studies, moves to a planetary literature that also incorporates non-human perspectives. Such texts can, according to Clark, “map disparate places and modes of life across the world according to often hidden structures of social, political and environmental violence” (147). Such a form of literature is also well-equipped to address the concerns from the field of ecocriticism about the impossibility of representing environmental crises

due to their scale.⁷ Following these ideas, it is important to both address deforestation as a violence against the environment by expanding notions of agency, and find a way to non-reductively discuss how deforestation is harmful to the natural world and humans alike.

Multidirectional Approaches to Ecological Violence

Scholarly work about ecological violence, and more specifically deforestation, often focuses exclusively on either violence against trees, or violence against humans as a result of deforestation. Going forward, it is important to both interpret deforestation as a violence against the environment by expanding notions of agency, and find a way to non-reductively discuss how deforestation is harmful to the natural world and humans alike. The rivalry between these different kinds of violence echoes the notion of competitive memory, which Michael Rothberg readily rejects in his *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009). Rothberg argues that in the public debate, collective memory is seen as scarce and something that needs to be competed for: remembering one thing means forgetting another (2). Based on this observation he identifies a logic of scarcity and states that the articulation of the past in collective memory is often understood as a struggle for recognition with only winners and losers (3). In this struggle, the obvious result is that less visible (one might also say slow) violence loses out to concrete and event-like forms of violence. Nixon's observations about the lack of media attention to slow violence can also be explained in this line, since the decision of dividing the limited space in for example a newspaper, can also take on the form of a zero-sum struggle.

The memory framework that Rothberg offers in his explanation of multidirectional memory is also relevant in order to study literary representations of past and present cases of deforestation. A cultural memory perspective helps to understand how the visions on deforestation that Christie, Powers and Proulx present have been shaped by historical processes. Rothberg's interpretation of Richard Terdiman's memory definition proposes to see memory as "a contemporary phenomenon, something that, while concerned with the past, happens in the present" (3-4). This interpretation shows how in

⁷ In this line, Clark stresses in *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015) that reading texts at different scales or contexts can produce different effects. For example, he argues that "small amounts of deforestation are different in quality as well as quantity from large-scale logging on every continent" (75).

dealing with issues like deforestation, which started in the past but continue in the present, a memory framework would be helpful. As for example Aleida Assmann has addressed, memory is a dynamic concept that does not lie exclusively in the past, but instead connects three temporal dimensions (92). Memory is evoked in the present, refers to the past, but always views the future.⁸ Without the memory of for example colonialism, we wouldn't be able to understand the full extent of why the context of deforestation is also violent and harmful to indigenous people. Besides Assmann, Astrid Erll argues that in the present day, we simply cannot afford ourselves the luxury of not studying memory. In other words, memory must always be taken into consideration in order to do justice to past and present injustices. These injustices are the effect of "certain mental, discursive, and habitual paradigms" (5) which are the result of long historical processes. In this line, we cannot understand our current exploitative relationship with our environment without looking at how people have historically imagined and shaped their relationships with nature.

Against the identified framework that understands collective memory as competitive memory, Rothberg suggests a new framework that considers memory as multidirectional. In this new framework, he reconceptualizes collective remembrance in multicultural and transnational contexts to arrive at a definition of multidirectional memory as the productive, intercultural dynamic of the interaction between different historical memories (3). Rothberg disputes the notion of the public sphere as a pre-given, limited space and instead proposes to view it as a discursive space open to continual reconstruction (5). Continuing, he stresses how remembrance can both cut across and bind together diverse spatial, temporal and cultural sites (11). Above all, thinking of memory as multidirectional instead of competitive entails undertaking a form of comparative thinking that does not shy away from traversing the sacred boundaries of particular eras or ethnicities (17). This comparative perspective in memory studies is a productive mode that, as Rothberg argues, often provides a ground on which people construct and pursue visions of justice (19).

Even though Rothberg's concept is open to other types of violence, it still mostly focuses on human-centered accounts of violence—his case studies are Holocaust

⁸ This future dimension of memory is of course especially relevant in the context of the Anthropocene. In a short dictionary contribution about the status of the field of Memory Studies in the Anthropocene, Richard Crownshaw states that in this context human and non-human worlds and systems are progressively starting to overlap.

memory and the memory of colonialism and Slavery. From a posthumanist perspective, Nathan Snaza takes up the concept of multidirectionality and argues that it is productive and necessary to not limit the concept to intra-human forms of violence. Snaza explains the uses and functionalities of reading colonial encounters as biopolitical events and argues that the value of Rothberg's concept is the way in which it can show how violences are linked, but it can also direct our attention to the distinctness and specificity of certain forms of violence (503). Snaza argues that we should see extreme violences such as the Holocaust, Slavery and factory farms "not as separate or separable things but as tendencies within the forces, institutions, and practices that make up life – and not simply human life" (504). An example of Snaza's posthuman take on the multidirectional memory of violence is the way in which most people can go through their daily lives without thinking about the violence committed to ecosystems (specifically forests). Snaza's work is exemplary for the way in which Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory has been taken up and expanded by others. These responses show the possibilities of creating a non-anthropocentric multidirectional memory that demonstrates the different histories of victimization as a result of deforestation without prioritizing one over the other. I would also argue that paying real attention to slow violence in the case of deforestation will always mean unraveling the multidirectionality inherent in it. Paying close attention to the way in which local communities are victimized by deforestation means acknowledging how the landscape, on which they are dependent, changes due to logging. Thereby the victimization of nature itself is also addressed.

Snaza's focus on non-anthropocentric multidirectional memory foregrounds how the field of Memory Studies is forced to adopt a posthumanist stance in order to avoid "the normative theorization of memory's symbolic reconstitution of human life and human worlds" (175). In a similar attempt to widen the focus of the field of Memory Studies, Rosanne Kennedy builds on the concept of multidirectional memory to make a link between past genocides and extinction today. Kennedy introduces the concept of 'multidirectional eco-memory' to create a multi-species frame of remembrance that links the human and non-human histories of harm, suffering and vulnerability. This notion of eco-memory is conceived as "an ecological assemblage in which all elements, human and nonhuman, are mobile, connected, and interactive" (269). In her literary analysis of multidirectional eco-memory, Kennedy focuses on oceans and specifically whale extinction. However, following the idea of eco-memory as an assemblage in which all

human and non-human elements are connected, this same analysis could be applied to the “multispecies horizon” (269) of the forest. The way in which Kennedy applies a multidirectional framework to the colonial practice of whaling also lays bare the way in which it facilitated the dispossession of indigenous people and the destruction of their country. The same is true in the case of deforestation and a focus on multidirectional eco-memory can lay bare these linked fates.

The notion of linked fates shows how thinking about the multidirectionality of memory does not stand on its own but has its origins in the research paradigm of intersectionality. This paradigm, that explores how social identities and subjectivities collide to reproduce systemic forms of oppression, stems from Black feminist scholarship. The specific term ‘intersectionality’ was introduced by legal scholar and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. In a critical literature review, self-identified intersectional researchers Naomi Mumbi Maina-Okoria, Jada Renee Koushik, and Alexandria Wilson explore how the term has expanded beyond the examination of human social subjectivities such as gender, race and sexual orientation to include non-humans as well (286). They argue that in order to address environmental problems, inclusive approaches are crucial to disrupt the classic nature/culture split that is reproduced by colonial legacies (291). This type of intersectional thinking, where multiple forms of oppression are productively put together, has also influenced the way in which alternative narratives about the Anthropocene have been conceptualized.

Most criticism within this new epoch has focused on the way in which it takes humanity as a collective and overlooks the important differences between human communities. For example, in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2015), Donna Haraway discusses multiple alternative conceptions suggested by scholars, such as the Plantationocene (highlighting the way in which global trade networks and colonial relations have fundamentally shaped the planet) and Capitalocene (refocusing attention on capitalism’s “carbon-greedy machine-based factory system” [206n5] that is responsible for the current climate crisis). Haraway then suggests her own term, the Chthulucene.⁹ In this alternative take on the new epoch, she stresses the way in which the human and non-human are inseparably linked. In her discussion of ways to accurately

⁹ By employing the term ‘Chthulu’, not to be confused with Lovecraft’s ‘Chtulu’, Haraway wants to draw attention to the “more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus” (101) and de-emphasize human exceptionalism in favor of multispecism.

respond to this link, she stresses the strength of stories to make sense of “the layered complexities of living in times of extinction, extermination, and partial recuperation” (38). However, not just any story will do, Haraway maintains. It is crucial that we change the customary “prick tale of Humans in History” (40). Haraway’s discussion of the wrongful fantasies about heroes and their weapons, of the “Man-making tale of the hunter on a quest to kill” (39) echoes some key motifs of the classical epic genre. Haraway is actively seeking out other genres and forms of storytelling that let go of this violence. However, letting go of ecological violence requires first confronting it, and I argue that this is best done through the same genre that, perhaps, glorified or legitimated this violence in the first place. However, an adaptation to its form is nonetheless necessary. This, I argue, is taking place in the sub-genre of the dendro-epic whose characteristics I discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

The reasoning behind these alternative conceptions of the Anthropocene is often—in line with Nixon’s ideas about the environmentalism of the poor—that some factions of the human collective are more privileged, and as a result are considerably more responsible for the environmental violence and the resulting ongoing planetary crisis than other, more disadvantaged groups. In other words: discussions about how to rename the Anthropocene often revolve around a discourse of “who is to blame” for the climate crisis. An alternative conception of the Anthropocene that best stresses the problem of the unequal responsibility is the term *Oliganthropocene*, proposed by geographer Erik Swyngedouw. With this term, he accentuates both the way in which Western consumers with a larger carbon footprint bear an unevenly larger responsibility for the destruction of the environment than those in the Global South, and the way in which the different communities are differently affected by environmental change (Bonneuil and Fressoz 71). These examples of ways in which the inequalities that are part of environmental violence are addressed, show how people have started to look multidirectionally at instances of violence in the Anthropocene.

The way in which not only victimization but also responsibility is addressed in these conceptualizations of the Anthropocene, makes it relevant to also look multidirectionally at the perpetration of deforestation. This lens shows how the practice of deforestation does not only produce victims in multiple directions, such as the displacement of indigenous people or the desertification of the land itself, but also produces perpetrators. A multidirectional memory perspective on deforestation foregrounds how lumber camps in the eighteenth century-United States have directly

contributed to deforestation, while it also takes into account the cumulative effect of the everyday consumption of beef on deforestation nowadays (Sarma) on its own terms. However, as I have discussed in the introduction, the current public debate surrounding responsibility for ecological crisis is not intersectional or multidirectional at all, but wants to point out very specific culprits. Moreover, arguments that absolve the individual or personal responsibility fluctuate, since there is a difference in impact between actions that happen on the local or global level. However, as I have pointed out in my discussion of violence, ecological and/or slow violence is often incremental, which shows how individual actions can also have impact on the longer run. For this reason, it is necessary to extend customary notions of responsibility and zoom in on the roles of individual people.

Beyond Victims and Perpetrators: Theorizing (Complex) Implication

Let us now turn to a more detailed discussion of the complexity of the issue of individual and collective responsibility. Our current vocabulary, including that of the various -cenes, is inadequate to actually discuss the diverse roles people can have in instances of ecological violence such as deforestation. Work on complicating simplistic notions of responsibility has started in the academic field of Perpetrator Studies, which has its origins in Holocaust and Genocide studies and has for a long time been occupied with complicating and deconstructing the roles that people assume in the context of mass killings and political violence. In *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988), Primo Levi has introduced the concept of the gray zone to discuss the extreme moral ambiguity in the concentration camps, where captives were often forced to participate in the degradation or carry out the killing of their fellow prisoners. With this discussion, Levi stresses how acts that contribute to violence can often be decoupled from issues such as agency, intentionality, knowledge and motivation. Similarly driven by the events of World War II, in *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-1945* (1992), Raul Hilberg introduced the concept of the bystander into the binary division between victim and perpetrator. However, such attempts to complicate simplistic binaries and notions of responsibility are not necessarily bound to the field of Perpetrator Studies. Works such as Robert Meister's *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (2011) and Bruce Robbins's *The Beneficiary* (2017) discuss the subject position of the structural beneficiary, for example of global economic inequality, and show how our relations with violence are not only

shaped synchronically, but also diachronically. Through this, their works also foreground how agency and intentionality are often decoupled from concrete actions, and therefore why a politics of blame would not do justice to the full complexity of our involvement in violence.

In her 2012 book *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, black feminist and social activist bell hooks demonstrates why the vocabulary of “blame” is problematic. She strategizes the ways in which systems of domination can be challenged and changed and analyzes the discourse and media representations of race and racism in order to suggest ways in which people can cross cultural and racial divides. Significantly, hooks addresses violent systems and the resulting intersectional forms of domination but refrains from pointing out specific culprits. In a chapter about the process of embracing diversity, she introduces the idea that the practice of blaming reinforces binary thinking and a subsequent culture of internalizing victimization (29).¹⁰ Going against this dualistic thinking, hooks proposes to move past an ideology of blame towards a politics of accountability (30). In hooks’s view, accountability is a concept that is much more productive and expansive than blame because “it opens a field of possibility wherein we are all compelled to move beyond blame to see where our responsibility lies” (30). This responsibility, she explains, can also change according to circumstances. Sometimes she is more likely to be victimized by an aspect of an oppressing system and in other cases she is in a position to be a perpetrator or victimizer (31). However, she holds that even though it is difficult to make distinctions between victims and victimizers, there are degrees of accountability (32). In this line, some may speak of the Plantationocene or Capitalocene instead of the Anthropocene to blame one specific exploitative system in particular. However, my argument is that exactly because of the harmful effects of consumer capitalism and plantation slavery, and because of their all-encompassing global reach, we are all to some degree partaking in such a system and can therefore be held accountable. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that some are more accountable than others.

¹⁰ Further explaining this, hooks describes how the traditional focus from the black power movement on blaming and identifying oppressors “stems from the fear that if we cannot unequivocally and absolutely state who the enemy is then we cannot know how to organize resistance struggle” (29). From the other end of the spectrum, white people who deny their responsibility for Slavery or claim that racism has ended disavow political reality and engage a similar politics of blame to insist that black people are not victims of racism but agents of their own suffering (30).

In *The Implicated Subject*, inspired by intersectional theory, Rothberg offers a new theory of political responsibility and concretely addresses complicity in the context of structural (and slow) violence. He defines the implicated subject as “a support of domination” (55), both in current society and across time. Such a position functions as a transmission belt (35) because people in such subject positions take part in a faulty system and pass on the violences and inequalities in everyday life. To be an implicated subject has nothing to do with identity, Rothberg stresses. Rather, being an implicated subject means occupying a specific subject position in a history of injustice or structure of inequality. Such a structure can be entered, for example, by “a beneficiary of global capitalism, far from its epicenter of exploitation” (48). With this specific argument Rothberg builds on the works of Robbins and Meister, but adds that one does not have to actually benefit from a harmful practice to be implicated in it. The implicated subject is a figure “to think with and through” (199) and it refers both to the materiality of human beings in a real world, but more importantly serves as a trope to describe the shifting and unforeseen socially constructed positions within that material world (199). Importantly, Rothberg emphasizes that even though everyone is somehow implicated in histories of injustice, that implication is not evenly distributed. That unevenness in the world can manifest itself on different levels or scales, “in local neighborhoods as well as global flows” (201).

Regardless of their implicated subject positions, not everyone is aware of their entanglement in injustice, Rothberg holds. Even stronger, it often happens unconsciously or is denied (11). An important example that helps to conceptualize collective responsibility in the Anthropocene relates to privileged consumers in capitalist systems in the Global North. Through their fossil fuel-based consumption patterns, they contribute disproportionately to all current and future ecological crises, and benefit from the way in which the effects of these catastrophes—as Nixon also argues—are geographically and temporally unevenly distributed. A term like ‘perpetrator’ would be too strong for the type of exploitation they participate in, Rothberg maintains, but these consumers can be described as “participants in and beneficiaries of a system that generates dispersed and unequal experiences of trauma and well-being simultaneously” (12). This example is also helpful to trace the difference between the structural implication and genealogical implication that Rothberg distinguishes. He identifies that the main cause for the production of injustice and processes of victimization are not deliberate evil acts but “an accumulation of distinct, dispersed actions” (53). In order to really understand how

implication comes into being, Rothberg describes, it is necessary to acknowledge that people can also be implicated in events that are either temporally or spatially distant, and in which they do not or have not played a direct role (60).

Referring to the long system of injustice of transatlantic slavery, Rothberg explains the main difference between genealogical and structural implications. Even though they are often overlapping in nature (60), the former is intimate but diffuse, and the latter is diffuse, yet intimate (79). Genealogical implication is the most direct form, for example when someone is an actual descendant of slave-owners and is therefore implicated in structural racism today. It is intimate in its familial cause but diffuse because it does not tell anything about someone's social status today. Structural implication, on the other hand, does not require the continuities of genealogy (80). If someone is part of a society in which the legacies of slavery still have an influence, and they are benefitting from this system, they are structurally implicated in it regardless of whether they have a continuous link to that past (79). For example, someone might have inherited the "cultural capital of whiteness (and non-blackness more generally)" (67). In other words, even though both versions of implication entangle synchronic and diachronic implication, they do so in different modes and ratios (78). Genealogical implication has a primarily temporal dimension, while structural implication is mostly spatial.

The coexistence of different simultaneous relations to past and present injustices (8) as a result of these different modes of implication, also means that there are cases where people occupy multiple subject positions (of implication / victimization / perpetration) at the same time. Rothberg calls this phenomenon 'complex implication' to describe instances where the interlocking of diverse oppressive systems produces subject positions where people are not victims of all systems, but hold more ambiguous mixed positions (37). This idea makes it possible to see multiple struggles at once, and Rothberg argues that in this context "a multidirectional politics of differentiated, long-distance solidarity has greater purchase than a politics premised on identification, purity, or the absolute separation between locations and histories" (203). Rothberg's examples of complex implication are all about cases where subjects that are connected to a past of victimization, for example because of their Jewishness, also have a present affiliation with perpetration, for example because of their whiteness (24). I would argue that the concept of complex implication is particularly useful to interpret the intertwined subject positions of people who are directly connected to deforestation, such as farmers in the Amazon rainforest.

Rothberg himself also discusses implication in an ecological context and gestures towards climate change as a possible and very productive site to make implication imaginable. In a brief reference to Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* (2013), Rothberg identifies what he calls "ecological implication" (74) in a present that is defined by neocolonial relations and ecological destruction. He sees the way in which Morton radically upscales his view on the planet and decenters the human to the same levels as other objects, as an acknowledgement of that ecological form of implication. In a later interview, Rothberg stresses the productivity of his concept for understanding our personal involvement in the climate crisis. While most people are of course not 'perpetrators' of climate change, through their "patterns of consumption that prop up an unsustainable global capitalism" (18) most of those in the Global North can be viewed as implicated. Rothberg here also interacts with reconceptualizations of the Anthropocene. He states that there is a risk in overstating the universality of implication, which is foregrounded through concepts such as the Capitalocene. However, Rothberg maintains, the concept of the implicated subject can help to bring this inequality out (18). He stresses that attention must go out primarily to the dominant responsibility of companies and states, but—in line with Nixon—I would argue that the media is already very well equipped to stress this. However, fiction is particularly useful for making our individual roles imaginable (18). Rothberg already hints at the role of (literary) representation when he states that implication might form a starting point for thinking about ways to deploy insights into our personal responsibility in order to create concrete acts of solidarity (19).

Rothberg not only theorizes implication, but also addresses the possibilities to transform and refigure the concept as the basis of solidarity even across social locations (33). In line with bell hooks, Rothberg suggests that implicated subjects cannot be held accountable for all the issues in which they are implicated. However, it is their role to confront their own implication, and they do "need to be held accountable for their relations to histories of violence and current hierarchies of power" (37). Because the implicated subject is not a static identity or category, it matters greatly if someone is disinterested in or acknowledging of their own position towards acts of victimization (33). Even though understanding one's own implicated subject position is not enough to bring about actual social change, it is a possible first step in creating alliances that do lead to such change. The example of ecological implication also greatly complicates the moral imagination that Rothberg claims is required to talk about implication, since the climate crisis both deals with a significant temporal distance and is also still actively happening.

There is a double temporality at work that “combines distance and constant renewal” (63). The question of environmental justice, Rothberg argues, entails also the slow temporality of ecological destruction that is difficult to narrate (225n31).

Rothberg maintains that the representation of implication in literary narratives helps to make these kinds of inheritances and experiences that are dispersed over time become perceptible (68). It offers possibilities for figurative explorations of structural problems and can make the large-scale histories that produce implication tangible and perceptible (199). However, novels can also obscure structures of slow violence and implication. In *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* Stephanie LeManager discusses the role of oil in works of fiction like Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. The novel narrates a certain nostalgia that is satisfied by driving, but makes no connection with resource consumption (89) and the slow violence inherent in common behaviour like stopping for gas. In their representation of embodied routines of consumption, melancholic texts such as Kerouac’s do not mention the ecological implications of fossil-fueled living. Similarly, reading a novel about deforestation that does not mention the arboreal origins of the paper from which the book is made shows in a similar way how novels can obscure implication, because it allows the reader to continue their harmful behaviour.

However, literature can also make implication visible and, more importantly, it can make the reader feel implicated. As Susanne Knittel argues, certain literary works can very effectively produce a “sense of discomfort” (380), which in turn can stimulate the reader to examine their personal involvement in both “past atrocities and present-day structures of inequality and political violence and one’s own implicatedness in them” (380). In the case of the novels under discussion here, they present trees—like Linda Hess has discussed—as “grievable, that is, too valuable to be lost” (190). This, in turn, evokes uncomfortable feelings among their readers when they very explicitly read how those grievable trees are in fact harmed by human actions, including, by extension, their own. Interestingly, though, the discussion of this harm does not concern spectacular violence (as executed by battle heroes as happens in the classical epic, for example), but the everyday actions of everyday people. Through actively discussing the networks that contribute to the violence against trees, these novels make it inescapable for the reader to reflect on their own position. The most concrete example is the speculative imagination in Michael Christie’s *Greenwood* of the rarity of books in 2038, when the disappearance of the world’s forests means that the paper supply has run dry. Here the

reader cannot ignore the way in which their own act of reading also puts a demand on the paper industry.

Conclusion

As discussed, fiction offers great possibilities for providing more insight into the workings and implications of ecological violence. However, the long literary history of novels that instead obscure its causes shows how fiction is not without the risk of contributing to the perpetuation of this type of violence. In his discussion of the “cultural regimes of fossil-fueled capitalism” (228), Richard Crownshaw argues for the possibility to engage in an inversive hermeneutics in which the background of a novel becomes the foreground, and the foreground becomes the background (234). Based on this, I would argue that it is a specific type of novel with specific qualities that can provide more insight into implication. The dendro-epic, which moves beyond a focus on the individual to a more planetary scale, also holds the narrative ability to present multiple viewpoints and weave different timescales and spaces together. As shown in this chapter, the notions of ecological violence, multidirectionality, and implication all require that attention be paid to multiple places and temporalities simultaneously. Looking beyond the figure of the perpetrator raises questions of agency and responsibility that can be thematically addressed through fiction. In the next chapter, I will attempt to place the specific qualities of *Greenwood*, *The Overstory* and *Barkskins* in a larger framework of the transformation of the 21st-century novel in times of ecological crisis, in order to frame them as examples of the ‘dendro-epic’. In the third and final chapter, I will discuss how the dendro-epic as a type of fiction is well suited to provide insight into implication in the violence of deforestation.

Chapter 2

The Dendro-Epic

Epic Dimensions in the Fictional Narration of Deforestation

In this chapter, I will answer the question of how precisely *Barkskins*, *The Overstory* and *Greenwood* offer a new and environment-induced take on the traditional genre of the epic. Particularly, I will be paying attention to the specific qualities of classical epics and take a comparative approach to discuss how Proulx, Powers and Christie transform these in the Anthropocene context. This, in turn, helps us understand how these authors complicate conceptions of violence and culpability. Primarily, a focus on figurations of ecological and structural violence in the dendro-epic is justified because the genre of the epic is traditionally connected with the topic of war and (the glorification of) violence. Analyzing my case studies as examples of the epic, entails seeing how violence in the modern epic novel comes in many forms. Reversely, looking at these forms of violence through the lens of the epic provides more insight into how individuals contribute to these forms of violence. Namely, the epic structure presents situations of violence and their socio-political consequences separately from each other instead of as one blended image, allowing for more insight into their specific causes. I will first discuss the most important characteristics of the classical epic, and zoom in on the role of violence in them. Continuing, I will address more contemporary discussions of the epic genre, for example ways in which the novel has been theorized as the modern epic. Specifically, I will focus on how the individual has been problematized and dealt with in these discussions. Finally, I arrive at a discussion of a new form of the epic that does not only look at spectacular violence, but also deals with incremental forms of environmental violence, and tries to navigate between individual actions and their larger consequences.

I argue that the dendro-epic, in adopting a planetary scale and a long duration time frame, attempts to represent the issue of deforestation in its totality, but is simultaneously aware of the impossibility of this task. Firstly, I focus on specific aspects of the classical epic, such as the arch-image and multi-perspectivity, and discuss how these devices lead to the constitution of a planetary space that decentralizes the human. Moreover, another consequence of this large-scale perspective is that the focus is no longer on the fate of one individual (group), but it becomes possible to multidirectionally look at all of those humans and non-humans that are harmed by deforestation in various

ways. Secondly, in this chapter I demonstrate how the classically epic panoramic and scenic narration lead to a decentralization of human-centered temporality. This foregrounding of either the slowness of trees or the speed of human action helps to understand how deforestation does not only entail the directly violent event of cutting down trees, but that deforestation itself can also be an act of slow violence that on the longer term leads, for example, to desertification or the displacement of indigenous people. Another effect of this play on temporality is that these dendro-epics show how humans are part of a larger planetary network that also includes the non-human world. Consequently, their—often unintendedly violent—actions do not only matter for themselves, but also influence this network. In chapter three, finally, I will zoom in on this aspect and discuss how the dendro-epics make the reader uncomfortably aware of the consequences of their personal actions.

Rethinking the Genre of the Epic

In the context of a study of the environmental issue of deforestation in literature, it might feel more logical to approach it as a literary theme. However, it can also be fruitful to look at novels about deforestation as examples of a specific type of fiction or even a specific subgenre. By explicitly discussing these novels as epics, I can lay bare both their formal qualities and analyze how these are transformed to create the dendro-epic. In *The Genre and the Invention of the Writer* (2003), Anis S. Bawarshi defines genres as spaces “that coordinate the acquisition and production of motives by maintaining specific relations between scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose” (17). Going further, Bawarshi describes genres as discursive sites of social and ideological action. He argues that due to recent transformations in the field, genre study is no longer merely a descriptive activity, but also an explanatory one (17). He points out that apart from defining and organizing kinds of text, genres now also define and organize types of situations and social actions similarly: each specific genre also contains underlying sociological and psychological assumptions that are worthy of study. Along these lines, it is important to analyze how *The Overstory*, *Barkskins* and *Greenwood*, by adapting the epic form, also allude to—or perhaps rather contradict—the societal norms of the classical age. One of these could be the move away from a strict focus on spectacular violence, to an inclusion of structural forms of violence.

However, in order to work with a specific genre, it is important to first define what I understand as a literary genre: not a fixed category, but a set of characteristics. In light of the former approach, Jacques Derrida has written about the law of genre, and is especially critical of rigid genre-distinctions. Most importantly, he maintains that genres in fact cannot do anything *but* mix (55). However, even if he is right—and I would argue that he is, as my case studies are also a mixture of at least the traditional epic, the modern novel, and the dendro-epic—that does not mean that one cannot use genre as a heuristic category to study literature. Moreover, I argue that the main problem with this poststructuralist rejection of genre is that it does not help authors who are searching a more practical approach in their attempts to write about the Anthropocene. In that respect, Mieke Bal and Alistair Fowler have been more helpful in their responses to Derrida's rejection of the genre category. They have both formulated workable definitions of genre that stress the movement and changeability inherent in any genre, which is very useful when thinking about the influence of the Anthropocene on fiction. My goal in this chapter is not necessarily to argue why my case studies are examples of the epic, but to use the idea of genre as a starting point for thinking about ways in which the form of the epic can help in representing deforestation as slow violence.

A contemporary view on deforestation that does justice to our personal roles in it requires the newly defined environmental impact of humanity in the Anthropocene to be taken into consideration. Specifically, literature plays an important role in addressing the complexity and entangledness of human-non-human relationships because of its imaginative ability to bring together different spatio-temporal scales. This requires that we do not only look at individual stories, but try to approach the topic from a larger scale as well. Recent discussions about environmental fiction are often about which genre is best able to deal with these challenges. In *Anthropocene Fictions* (2015), Adam Trexler argues that the recent move towards realism in Anthropocene fiction shows the value of these novels to present themselves as a force that interacts with climate change, simultaneously remaking the understanding in human culture of both the climate and the narrative dimensions of the novel (35). However, people like Amitav Ghosh have criticized the contemporary realist novel for its focus on individual people and everyday details. No matter what the proposed solution is, all these debates seem to revolve around the question of what the best way to represent the large scale of environmental destruction in literature is.

Surprisingly, the ancient epic genre addresses similar issues, albeit in a different form, in its attempts to represent the most essential aspects of a culture at once. In his textbook definition of the classical epic, J.K. Newman describes it as a “long narrative poem (q.v.) that treats a single heroic figure or a group of such figures and concerns an historical event, such as a war or conquest, or an heroic quest or some other significant mythic or legendary achievement that is central to the traditions and belief of its culture” (362). Similarly, Richard P. Martin speaks of the epic as a “super-genre” (17) with the ambition of “undertaking to articulate the most essential aspects of a culture, from its origin stories to its ideals of social behavior, social structure, relationship to the natural world and to the supernatural” (18). What these definitions have primarily in common, is that they stress the wide scope of the epic genre. Additionally, the fact that Martin mentions the treatment of origin stories in the epic is especially interesting with respect to *Barkskins*, *Greenwood*, and *The Overstory*, since they are all concerned, in various ways, with depicting the origin of the climate crisis. Moreover, there is a difference between a discussion of the origin of environmental violence and a discussion of the cause of such violence: “origin” allows for a more complex discussion of the various involvements than simple causation. This, in turn, relates to the wide scope of the epic genre, since complex processes such as these need bigger stories to explain them.

In terms of content, Martin sums up features of the epic such as “a cosmic scale; a serious purpose; a setting in the distant past; the presence of heroic and supernatural characters; and plots pivoting on wars or quests.” (10). Especially the last characteristic is interesting, because it can be related to the focus on (spectacular) violence in the classical epic which, of course, does not do full justice to other types of violence that are connected to war. Thomas McLernon Greene argues that in its treatment of (war) politics, the epic limits itself not to society but embraces the natural or moral worlds (200). Furthermore, the political discussions in the epic focus upon violence rather than administration (201). It is important to note that Greene defines violence as direct, event-like, and contained within a single moment. He is not alone in this, since other authors have written similarly about violence in the epic. For example, Reginald A. Foakes has written about Shakespeare’s changing attitude towards violence, thereby focusing mainly on the question of “how it is that an individual, usually a man since violence has always been primarily associated with males, can for no adequate reason commit terrible acts of violence” (7). This example demonstrates Foakes’ quite narrow take on violence. Similarly, Albrecht Classen provides an insightful analysis of sexual violence in Medieval

heroic-epic songs, but focuses primarily on the act of rape (201). Finally, Raj Balkaran and A. Walter Dorn, have shown how violence is not limited to the ancient European epic. They discuss representations of violence in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*, thereby focusing on “violent force” (661) and the epic’s preoccupation with legitimizing violence (663).

However, there is more to the classical epic mode than just these thematic aspects. In terms of form, both Martin and Newman mention the long and elaborative narrative, the episodic structure, and the elevated and unusual language and vocabulary. These characteristics show how—compared with the lyric and dramatic mode—the epic is probably *the* most malleable and enduring ancient literary form. It incorporates elements of lyric as well as dramatic poetry, since it includes both the lyric presence of a narrator that offers commentary and the dramatic mode that lets the characters speak for themselves. This means that effectively, the speaker forms the bridge between the reader and the characters. Through this, the epic mode opens up a space for the narrator to give commentary on the actions of the characters. From the three classical genres of lyric, drama, and epic, the latter mode is the most prevalent nowadays. This is one of the reasons why the novel, to which category *The Overstory*, *Greenwood*, and *Barkskins* of course also belong, has often been conceptualized as the modern epic.

In their theorizations, literary critics in the twentieth century have often cast the epic as the antithesis of the novel. Michael Bakhtin, for example, has conceptualized the novel as the only modern genre that is truly alive (17), and has painted the epic as its dead Other that is best left in the past in order to make place for the novel. Bakhtin is mostly interested in creating a theory of the novel, and therefore writes about the novelization of other genres. He argues that “the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted” (3). Bakhtin continually compares the epic to the novel, thereby foregrounding what he sees as their differences. For example, he argues that the epic always looks back to a (distant) past, and is therefore constituted on the basis of memory instead of knowledge and epistemology (15). The epic requires an “absolute past” (13), while the novel is determined by mere personal experience in the present and future, Bakhtin maintains. In general terms, he deems everything that is epic as immutable and already completed, while the novel shows the “contemporaneity” (19) of the world: everything in the novel is unfinished and still changeable. Responding to these ideas, John McWilliams has discussed the way in which the American epic has transformed the classical genre. He argues that the novel and the epic are not that different from each other, and that in the nineteenth century the poetic epic has

transformed into the prose epic (5). This differentiation is also crucial if we want to understand modern manifestations of the epic form in dendro-epics such as *Greenwood*, *Barkskins* and *The Overstory*.

György Lukács, like Bakhtin, sees the classical epic as focused on capturing the world in its totality, and therefore also as “subjectless” (58). In the world of ancient Greece, there are no individuals, and “the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars” (29). Identifying a change from this in the modern world, Lukács defines the novel not as the antithesis of the epic, but as a new kind of secular epic that attempts to make sense of a world of “transcendental homelessness” (41) that—as a result of modernity—has lost its totality. The novel form responds to this fragmentation of modernity by attempting to construct some kind of totality or wholeness. Like Lukács, Franco Moretti argues that the modern epic, with its encyclopedic aspects, is best able to meet the demands of the contemporary world with its globalized economic system. He discusses how the tradition of the epic has evolved from antiquity, and how epics belong not to a distant past, but “live in history” (5). Furthermore, Moretti maintains that the epic is symbolically heterogenous, consisting of multiple and fragmentary worldviews, but also open to and capable of permanent extension. He argues that the epic genre is particularly suitable to encapsulate the tensions between globalization and fragmentation, totality and openness through the use of literary devices that are capable of representing non-organic complexity.¹¹

However, as I have stated earlier, the representational and hermeneutic challenges posed by the Anthropocene demand a new approach to the novel, one that foregrounds to complexity of humanity’s geologic agency and consequently our impact on nature. Tobias Boes maintains that Lukács’ model is “built upon the notion of an irreconcilable gap between human subjectivity and the natural world” (101). Boes identifies *Robinson Crusoe*—often mentioned as one of the first realist novels—as a major turning point that marked this gap, the moment in which “the novel turned its back on the natural world” (100), by embracing both the grand and intimate scales of human history. Rather than reading nature, he maintains, Crusoe’s attempt at tracking the duration of his imprisonment through a system of daily markings in a tree shows the start of how humanity started to inscribe their own will onto nature. The current human-led environmental destruction means that we must find literary ways to address this

¹¹ Moretti offers a long list of literary features that he deems capable, such as polyphony, leitmotiv, collage, allegory, stream of consciousness and dissonance.

entanglement rather than try to navigate the artificial gap between the human and natural world. Filling this gap again might mean a return to the epic form that was well-equipped to deal with the totality of not just the human, but also of the human-non-human world.

However, even if the epic genre is capable of imagining and encapsulating the environmental crises in the Anthropocene, we cannot just go back to its anthropocentric classical form. At the same time, the novel, even though it does not take itself as seriously as the classical epic, is often just as anthropocentric. A move beyond the anthropocentrism of both of these forms is therefore necessary here. This requires a more ironic tone, which matches the critical self-reflexivity that Dipesh Chakrabarty maintains new forms of fiction in the Anthropocene need. The dendro-epic, precisely because it also takes into consideration a non-human perspective, is able to adopt this self-reflexivity. This tone is required to view our harmful actions towards the forest not from the inside, but from the outside.

This adoption of a non-human perspective leads to a new planetary take on the ‘totality’ of the classical epic, and also shows how the dendro-epic can respond to Ghosh’s claim that the contemporary realist novel, with its disproportional focus on the emotions of the individual and the details of the everyday, has failed to address environmental destruction adequately (8). Ghosh suggests that most literature entertains a mode of concealment that prevents people from recognizing the reality of the current ecological crisis. Dimock takes a similar global approach to the epic in her discussion of the presence of the epic and the novel across continents. She stresses the kinship and interconnection between texts in a specific genre, thereby referring to the way in which they share an “iterative structure of comparable attributes” (86). This take on genre is also useful to see how specific attributes, for example those of the ancient epic, are reintroduced in the modern epic novel. Dimock states that the epic is not an archaic genre that is completely behind us, but an archaic genre that is “still evolving, still energized by foreign tongues” (“Genre” 96).

As discussed, McWilliams, Moretti and Dimock show how modern novels can bear epic qualities. These aspects—albeit in differentiated form—can also be found in *Greenwood*, *The Overstory* and *Barkskins*. A focus on these specific epic dimensions also opens ground for transforming them, especially since the epic as a genre is so sensitive to the influences of modern society. A good example of this is the way in which the epic has been critically regarded as a predominantly masculine genre. However, in line with the

general trend in society, there have been increased attempts to transform the epic form into something less focused on the straight white male.¹² Jeremy M. Downes discusses the increased production of epic poetry by people that are in one way or another marginalized, for example based on gender, race, sexual orientation, age, class or region (245). Going against the idea that the epic is an intrinsically patriarchal and nationalistic genre that is mostly dead, he argues that such a simplistic explanation of the epic is of limited use when confronted with the contemporary drive toward epic among female poets, people of color, and postcolonial poets. His reading of the epic proposes to lose monolithic and monoglot views in order to see the epic tradition as “an open and shifting array (and disarray) of textual forces” (245).

Despite the relevance of these insights, Downes remains skeptical about “the prospect of glossy-pictured coffee table ‘green epics’” (250), mostly because he expects a focus on the ‘green’ to lead to the disappearance of the war and violence that is so traditional to the epic (251). However, as I have shown in chapter one, a turn to nature and a focus on violence are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, an environmental and posthumanist perspective on the epic is needed to help see why a focus on the violence of deforestation does not lead the epic to “democratize so far as to disappear” (251). Although this focus on ecological violence does bring many different new perspectives to the epic form, it may actually reinforce epic aspects such as violence or a large-scale perspective rather than erasing them. In this light, Ursula Heise has discussed how biodiversity databases that inventorize all life forms on earth, can be understood as modern epics through their attempt to grasp the entirety of the world as it is currently known (65). Advancing her argument, she discusses how in the twentieth century science fiction has been the genre with the most epic qualities due to its persistence to “narrate at the grand scale of the planet, the human species, and beyond” (215). However, I would argue that realist forms of literature such as the dendro-epic are just as well capable of capturing this grand scale. Moreover, Heise explicitly connects ecology to the epic form, but views the epic mainly as an attempt to capture the planetary scale that is of such importance in the Anthropocene. There are, however, more formal elements of the epic that are helpful to represent deforestation as a form of ecological violence.

As I have mentioned in my introduction, the scholarly debate between McGurl and Dimock best demonstrates the influence of posthumanist and Anthropocene thinking in

¹² Good examples of such transformations are Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), which each reread an ancient epic to offer a female perspective.

discussions about the epic. Most importantly, McGurl offers a solution to the toxic individualism of the classical epic hero by stressing the potential of literature to function as a scaling device: this way, both individual and planetary scales can be accurately addressed. The specific aspects that Dimock and McGurl discuss show which elements a contemporary epic capable of accurately representing deforestation should contain. Such a literary work both connects storylines that are widespread on a spatio-temporal scale and, through its focus on the perspective of trees, adds an awareness of planetary indifference towards human affairs. In the rest of this chapter, I will zoom in on some general theory about the transformation of the novel in the Anthropocene, in order to then relate these to my case studies. This is also where I will discuss the specific formal elements of the classical epic in greater detail, and show how the viewpoint of the Anthropocene transforms them. Assisted by these insights, I will argue how my case studies could be considered dendro-epics, and discuss why the formal qualities of the dendro-epic help to represent deforestation as a form of (slow) violence.

A Planetary Form

As I have argued earlier, even though the epic in its classical form has mostly disappeared, novels with formal aspects that closely resemble the epic form know a current revival. By comparing characteristics of the classical epic with descriptions of Anthropocene literature, such as the ones Pieter Vermeulen formulates in his overview work *Literature and the Anthropocene*, I will now demonstrate the potential of their combining forces. Generally speaking, fictional attempts to represent life in the Anthropocene offer a planetary experience of time and space that surpasses a human framework. Specifically, Clark argues that due to their non-anthropocentric scale, the full consequences of environmental issues in the Anthropocene can only be really understood on a global spatial-temporal scale which transcends the level of the individual by multiple steps (74). In this line, *Greenwood*, *The Overstory* and *Barkskins* each navigate between a planetary perspective that offers commentary on humanity as whole, and an individual perspective that traces the large-scale impact of the actions of a single character/individual characters. The formal qualities of the epic can contribute to the upscaling that is required since, as Greene argues, the first quality of the epic imagination is that of expansiveness (194). In contrast to the comic and the tragic, he argues, which each focus on their own fixed horizons, the epic “characteristically refuses to be hemmed in, in time as well as space” (194).

Applied to the issue of deforestation this means that to make understandable how this type of violence influences not only human life or specific ecosystems, but the planet as a whole, literary space must scale up from a strictly individual to a planetary one. The traditionally wide scope or scale of the classical epic is very well capable of responding to these demands. This process of upscaling is created, as Greene argues, by moral and historical scenes and symbols that merge into a single, giant image which cannot be easily pulled apart (195). Greene coins the term “arch-image” (196) in order to contrast the overarching image that the epic form offers with the fragmentary images that the tragic and comic form presents. Such an arch-image also corresponds with Lukács’s idea of the epic form that tries to capture the world in its totality. Greene’s term very well explains not only the expansiveness of the epic, but also how it functions as an arch or arc which, apart from offering no space outside of it, gives meaning to the specific details of the narrative. The characters in these arch-images, Greene maintains, “rather than remaining outside it, are contained by it, help to define it and indeed to comprise it” (196). An arch-image, according to Greene, does not invite a scrupulous study of specific passages, but invites the reader to explore the complete and often unknown parts of a culture, including for example its origin stories.

These insights about the expansiveness of the epic form are also highly relevant for the topic of deforestation, because it demonstrates how in novels that take up the epic form, it is no longer possible to offer only fragments of the implications of this issue, but offer a complete picture of its impact. This also foregrounds the multidirectional consequences of deforestation, for example by being able to focus on both a scientist describing the impoverishing state of trees and a native American seeing his homeland destroyed, and also demonstrates types of violence other than the spectacular forms. Each of my case studies, by including a vastly diverse range of characters, combine a multiplicity of human perspectives on the individual scale, and bring these together to create a global scale to say something about humanity’s actions as a whole in relation to deforestation. Moreover, all of these novels express the ambition to include non-human perspectives as well, even though some foreground nature more than others. The non-human perspective contributes to the widening of the strictly human perspective as we know it from most standard novels. Tied together by the omniscient narrator, which is one of the characteristics of the epic, they present an arch-image infused with the perspective of both the human and non-human actors that are connected to

deforestation, thereby offering a planetary perspective on this topic. All three of my case studies present the reader with such an arch-image in their own way.

In Michael Christie's *Greenwood*, the main storyline follows members from four generations of the Greenwood family. Since the overarching story is told from generation to generation, each of the characters is equally important in their contribution to the progress of the narrative. By making these characters quite diverse in their approach to nature and each of them flawed in their own way, the novel attempts to capture not only this specific family, but say something about humanity's approach to nature in general. In this line, even though *Greenwood* is mostly about a single family, it is also critical of the "capitalist, colonialist brainwashing" (407) of the family tree. The novel is based on the idea that anyone can form a family, because many of the family members, including family founders Everett and Harris, have actually become related to each other by coincidence instead of being blood relatives.¹³ Viewed in this light, the idea of inheritance through a family line is especially strange since as Willow Greenwood voices, "a single child has no fewer than sixteen different great-grandparents ... and yet we idiotically focus on the single surname that survives" (408).

Trees form an ever-present background to the family's affairs in the novel, which begins in a future where trees have become scarce and therefore practically worshipped. The family members are connected not only through their surname, but also through their inheritance of Greenwood Island. This isolated island is in 2038 in the novel one of the sole places remaining where people can see ancient trees in their natural environment. In the closing paragraphs of the novel, sole survivor of the family Jake Greenwood concludes that even if all of the people who bear the same surname as her—her great-grandfather Harris, her grandmother Willow—are not actually by blood related to her, she is still connected to them through their shared past: "they're all with her, embedded in her cellular structure; if not part of her family tree, then part of her family forest" (487). Thus, she concludes, families are not like a singular tree that branches out, but more like a network of trees: a forest. This is important because it demonstrates how in *Greenwood*, stories from very different people are brought together in this novel to tell not only the family history of the Greenwoods, but also the history of the Greenwood Island to which they are all connected.

¹³ Everett and Harris are found as the sole survivors of a train crash and consequently raised as brothers while not actually being related by traditional family bounds. I will elaborate on this further down the thesis.

The perspective of the narrator in *Greenwood* is different for each part or episode of the story, with most parts being told from a third person omniscient perspective. As a result, even if the focus is on one of the family members, the reader learns about the opinions and thoughts of all side characters as well. The effect of including all these different perspectives is twofold. Firstly, the characters widen the focus on the Greenwood family to a more general perspective. Secondly, it becomes more difficult for the reader to agree with the opinions or inhabit the perspective of individual characters, because they are contradicted by a different character a few pages later. These effects all contribute to the creation of an overarching image, but do not explicitly include the perspectives of trees apart from letting them form a crucial backdrop.¹⁴ While *Greenwood* certainly offers a scale that transcends the local, the question of whether it is really global in scale—let alone planetary—is debatable. Nevertheless, by illustrating how humans, like trees, can be connected to each other like in a forest, the novel foregrounds the interconnectedness of individuals at different scales.

Reading *Barkskins*, according to one critic, is a bit “like strolling around the world’s largest ant farm” (Garner n.p.). This comment is not surprising, since the novel offers over a hundred human characters with different outlooks on life. Apart from the few descendants of either René Sel or Charles Duquet that she follows more closely, Proulx does not spend much time introducing her characters. For example, sometimes characters are introduced and die in the same sentence, or multiple characters and their relationships are mentioned in a sentence that does not even contain them as their main subject: “One of the women—he was almost sure it was Losa, the wife of Peter Sel, one of Kuntaw’s sons, the older brother of Etienne—” (598). Since *Barkskins* is narrated by a third person omniscient narrator but focalized through multiple perspectives, the thoughts and feelings of minor characters are also taken into consideration, even if only for the duration of a few sentences. This is important because the story is morally

¹⁴ The 1908-section of the novel forms an exception to this and hints at a non-human presence. In this part, the story is told from an ambiguous communal perspective, when an omniscient narrator recalls how “on the night of April 29, 1908, a family took root before our eyes” (209). This quasi-panoptic perspective resembles the chorus in classical Greek tragedy and forms a narration that is comprised of many different perspectives. Since the members of this chorus are never made explicit, and the story takes place close to an important woodlot, it is suggested that the trees in the forest surrounding the town are also included in this communal perspective. However, since the novel never explicitly takes this perspective up again, it does not fully integrate a non-human perspective in its theme and form.

difficult, and almost every possible perspective on these moral difficulties is discussed. The story is told in a detached, objective, matter-of-fact style, but the focalization changes with every introduction of a new character.

As a result, *Barkskins* offers a complete view of how people interacted with forests in particular historical periods. Therefore the novel no longer focuses strictly on the experience of individual people or families, but on all kinds of human characters who—whilst connected through their shared but distant family trees—live very different lives. Thus, *Barkskins* offers a wide human perspective that surpasses specific countries, continents, or historical periods. Because all the characters quickly pass, the focus remains primarily on the natural world, and specifically the forests, which may change but are always present. This relates very well to the image of the “ant-farm” as introduced by Garner, which describes how the novel offers a detached view on the way in which human actions do not only destroy nature, but also victimize the native Americans who are close to nature through their way of life, and eventually also destroy humanity itself. As a result, *Barkskins* does not explicitly include a non-human perspective, but it makes the combined fate of the human and non-human arboreal world more important than the fate of individual characters. It offers a devastating arch-image of how historically, the human world has interacted with the arboreal world and the problem of deforestation. As such, the novel confronts the reader with the multidirectional memory of how North America as we currently know it was built on the colonization and domination of not only the indigenous people in that area, but also on the destruction of its forests. As a consequence, *Barkskins* alerts its reader to how deforestation victimizes both humans and non-humans in different ways.

Finally, *The Overstory* is literally an over-arching story or arch-image about the way humanity treats trees. The novel is divided into four parts, significantly titled ‘Roots,’ ‘Trunk,’ ‘Crown,’ and ‘Seeds,’ and thereby resembles the life cycle of a tree. The novel is told by an omniscient third-person narrator that speaks for a diverse range of main characters, including both people and trees. The framing passages that function as prologues to each section, suggest the presence of an arboreal narrator. Primarily, the prologue on the first pages of the novel describes an anonymous woman leaning against a pine tree and tuning her ears down to the frequencies of the tree in order to hear it ‘speak’. Thereupon, a chorus of trees comes together to directly address not only this woman, but also the reader: “all the ways you imagine us ... are always amputations. Your kind never sees us whole” (3). The prologue ends with a suggestive sentence: “*The*

pine [the woman] leans against says: Listen. There's something you need to hear" (4, emphasis in original). Significantly, in this entire paragraph the direct speech of these trees is not italicized, while the rest of the text is. This suggests that the subsequent sections that make up most of the novel, also not italicized, are the direct speech of an arboreal narrator. Moreover, the positioning of these passages in the beginning and end of the novel adds to the idea that the entire novel might in fact be told from the point of view of trees. This interpretation is further supported by the title of the novel, which refers to the canopy of tree foliage high above the ground. In contrast with this stands the understory, which refers to the plant life growing closer to the ground, beneath the forest canopy. The allegory here, evidently, is that human lives only form an understory, especially from the point of view of trees.

The Overstory introduces nine different characters, each offering an entirely different take on life, and shows how the fate of these characters is in some way or another linked to trees. One of them, Neelay Mehta, has an accident when he is eleven where he falls from a fig tree, leaving him bound to a wheelchair for the rest of his life: "There will be years to wonder whether the branches jerked. Whether the tree had it in for him" (102). Another character, war veteran Douglas Pavlicek, has an accident during his time in the army with his parachute. A banyan tree breaks his fall, thereby effectively saving his life: "He hangs twenty feet above the Earth in friendly territory, facedown and spread-eagled in the arms of a sacred tree bigger than some villages" (82). Moreover, the trees are explicitly named, making them very charismatic, and many of the characters at a certain point also receive a nickname connected to trees: "They christen themselves with forest names that night, in the soft drizzle of the redwoods, on a blanket of needles" (216). From then on, they only refer to each other with these names. The process of connecting human characters and trees through the element of labelling or naming, is not only important on the level of the story, but also integrated in the form and design of the novel.¹⁵ Each of the personal chapters of the nine main characters, in the 'Roots' section of the novel, includes the illustration of a branch with leaves from a specific tree. These illustrations correspond with the 'totem trees' of each of these characters.¹⁶ By

¹⁵ Here Powers also alludes to the old cultural practice of planting trees dedicated to specific people. In The Netherlands, for example, following the tradition of the 'Oranjeboom', linden trees are planted on the occasion of important life events of the Dutch royal family, such as a birth, crown year or marriage.

¹⁶ The list of the nine characters and their totem trees is as follows:
 Nicholas Hoel: chestnut tree

assigning each of these human characters a specific tree, the novel stresses how they are, in good and bad ways, connected to them.

The introductory chapters of these characters explain (parts of) their individual origin stories, but the reader is not yet aware of how they are connected. After moving into the ‘Trunk’ section of the novel, the characters’ stories are brought together and the reader realizes that the stories of each of these characters were connected before either they or the reader realized it. As the narrator comments, the characters’s lives “have long been connected, deep underground. Their kinship will work like an unfolding book” (132) – the trees, the ‘overstory’, has brought their individual ‘understories’ together. In the ‘Crown’ section, the lives of five characters—the radical activists—become even more entangled and their individual stories alternate rapidly, sometimes within a single paragraph or even a sentence. However, their life trajectories finally, together with those of the four remaining characters, move further apart and branch out again. In the final section, ‘Seeds’, they have all become separated again. However, their ideas, such as Neelay’s popular world-building computer game *Mastery*, are persistent and are planted in the heads of both the remaining characters and the novel’s readers like seeds: it is not the trees who need help, but humans themselves, since deforestation could also lead to our own collective suicide (482). Here, as Marco Caracciolo also argues, we get confronted with a “form of nonhuman vitality” (62) that, despite the perceived mastery of humanity over nature, is actually in charge of the planet. This perspective makes *The Overstory* the most comprehensive of the three case studies in its presentation of a planetary arch-image. However, this view also obtains the risk of representing humanity solely as one entity, thereby making it more difficult to see the effects of individual actions.

To summarize, in each of these novels the presentation of an arch-image infused with both human and non-human perspectives showcase how trees also have an important function in larger planetary ecosystems. This, in turn, helps to represent

Mimi Ma: mulberry tree

Adam Appich: maple tree

Ray Brinkman: oak tree

Dorothy Cazaly: linden tree

Douglas Pavlicek: Douglas-fir tree

Neelay Mehta: fig tree

Patricia Westerford: birch tree

Olivia Vandergriff: gingko tree

deforestation as a practice that affects the entire planet. This is expanded even more by the wide geographical scope of these novels. For example, through its focus on the timber trading industry, *Barkskins* demonstrates the global reach of this industry from its early days on, and takes its reader to different countries all over the world: The Netherlands, Germany, France, China, New Zealand, and Brazil. Moreover, the novel does not only mention the countries that characters travel to, but also specific towns or cities. This demonstrates the attention to detail and historical accuracy of the novel, which is furthered by the way that the original names of these places are used, such as the Native American versions “Wobik” (55) and “Kébec” (56) instead of present-day Quebec. *Greenwood* functions similarly, as Harris Greenwood’s timber business takes him to Japan, and his ‘great-granddaughter’ Jake Greenwood pursues a PhD at Utrecht University. Moreover, the inclusion of characters with a wide geological background widen the spatial scope of the novel.¹⁷ *The Overstory*, finally, obtains a global perspective from its early beginning through the ‘roots’-stories of the individual characters. These stories explain how the often non-American families of these characters ended up in the United States: example’s are Nicholas’s Norwegian roots, Mimi’s Chinese family, or Neelay’s Indian background. Moreover, experiences like those of Douglas in the Vietnam War, which I will analyze in chapter three, emphasize both that ecological violence is not something strictly Western, and also that Western actions can have consequences in other parts of the world.

The global approach and wide scale of these novels also foregrounds how all three of them obtain a multidirectional perspective, and take up the issue of deforestation to discuss other major injustices as well. *Barkskins*, for instance, draws attention to how the combined impact of colonization in North America has not only destroyed the forest itself, but subsequently also harmed indigenous people.¹⁸ For *Greenwood*, poverty and the general impact of financial crises on individual lives is additional major issue. This is for example brought forward through the subplot of Jake’s massive student debt, which haunts her and brings her to despair. Powers’s *The Overstory*, finally, discusses through stories such as those of Mimi’s Chinese father (who commits suicide because he hasn’t

¹⁷ For example, Liam Feeney, the poet that becomes both Harris Greenwood’s interpreter and his lover, has his roots in Dublin, while Meena Bhattacharya, both a successful violin player and Jake Greenwood’s mother, is from India.

¹⁸ I mention the fate of indigenous people here to show that ecological violence is multidirectional, rather than to imply that ecological violence is ultimately about people.

been able to get used to his life after immigration) the difficulties of the multicultural society in the United States. Thus, by bringing together all kinds of different individual perspectives in an arch-image, these novels provide enough room to both discuss the multidirectional relationship between different societal and environmental issues, as well as to do justice to those specific issues.

To conclude, although each of these novels focuses not only on individual human characters but also on humanity as a collective, they do not all do so in the same way. *Greenwood* starts off with a warning, and shows how individual actions combined lead to collective agency. *Barkskins* takes this a step further by neglecting paying attention on individual human perspectives in order to stress how the fate of humans and the forest are aligned. The novel does not explicitly include a non-human perspective but is still self- and critical about centering humanity in matters that also concern non-humans in other ways. Finally, *The Overstory* is the least anthropocentric by including non-human perspectives through evoking a non-human narrator. In the ‘Trunk’ and ‘Crown’ sections the stories of the individual characters increasingly merge perspectives into an arch-image that is the overstory itself. So these novels tell—or at least try to tell—a story on a planetary scale, about how humanity as a single entity deals with the forests as a whole. Because the storylines alternate so often, the reader is not able to fully go along with one storyline, but an experience of human and non-human space combined remains in the foreground. However, since the novels do in fact zoom in on specific characters, they also demonstrate how individual actions are embedded in a larger planetary framework instead of being separate from it.

Recalibrated Timescapes

As I have shown, all three of my case studies aspire to offer an experience of space that surpasses the strictly local and hints at planetary dimensions. However, as Pieter Vermeulen argues, Anthropocene literature that *only* offers an expansive or planetary scale is also not ideal, since notions like slow violence “are not absolute substances, but derive both their rhetorical force and their analytical significance from their contrast to the conventional extensions and rhythms of human life” (96). Literary time is a good formal tool to represent violence that deviates from the spectacular by bringing about a contrast between a human temporal framework and an—often much slower—non-human temporality. Peter Boxall observes a similar contrast when he describes the difficult task of the contemporary novel to navigate between both “a ‘human time’ that is

moving too strangely, too fast and too slow to be recorded by any clock, and a planetary time that is now asserting its own implacable and anti-human logic” (113). The epic form is very well suited to deal with these alternations between different temporalities. In his classic *The Craft of Fiction*, Percy Lubbock distinguishes two different kinds of narration of the (epic) novel: the panoramic narration, which looks at a plot from above, over time, (27) and the scenic narration, which zooms in to a specific incident as it happens on a given hour and in a given place (70). Responding to Lubbock, Greene specifies that in the case of the epic form, not much time is spent lingering on the panoramic, but the genre instead hurries through it as transitional material. Instead, the epic works from specific scene to scene to give context.

The traditionally loose structure of the epic, with its combination of panoramic and scenic narration, each with different functions, leads to a different distribution of time. As a result of the different functions of these narrative techniques, some events are narrated very quickly and sweepingly, and some very slowly and in great detail. Since literary representations of the Anthropocene ask for a different experience of time and temporality that surpass the strictly human timeframe, a dendro-epic narrates significant aspects in a human life in a very quick, and panoramic way, almost skipping over them. Additionally, in specific scenes where the narrative slows down, a lot of attention is paid to arboreal matters. Moreover, the alternation of panoramic overviews with specific scenes contributes to the continued upscaling and downscaling between an individual and a global or planetary perspective. However, the usual fictional structure in which nature and the general state of the planet form a panoramic background to the individual human affairs that are discussed in specific scenes, is reversed here: the lives of (human) individuals that pass as the years go by form the panoramic background to scenes featuring detailed descriptions of the life of trees and forests.

This is most explicitly visible in *Barkskins*, where the different chapters alternate in either the detailed description of a specific scene, or a panoramic overview of the story of an entire generation of the Sel or Duke family. A few years summarized in one sentence are not uncommon, for example when in the beginning of the novel a seemingly important character suddenly leaves the narrative frame. The reader never learns about the specificities of his adventures, except for a small comment that mentions how “more than two years passed before Monsieur Trépagny returned on a fine sorrel stallion” (30). In *Barkskins*, individual human lives are worth almost nothing, the same way that an

individual tree is cut down carelessly.¹⁹ As such, the panoramic part of the narrative often involves general life events, while specific scenes often not strictly discuss human affairs, but use personal discussions between characters with to address the state of the world's forests. For example on their first date, Lavinia Duke—heiress of logging company Duke and Sons—and Dieter Breitsprecher take a first romantic walk in the park, and Dieter discovers Lavinia's affection for robins. He comments on this, but primarily takes up the opportunity to ask if she knows “how badly the robins are hurt when we cut down their trees ... We take their trees away and they are forced to build nests over whirling saws.” (554). Through scenes such as these, the customary order in novel is reversed: personal exchanges between characters are filled with talk about the destruction of trees, while important events in individual human lives—such as marriage or death—are pushed to the panoramic background.

On a less fundamental level, *The Overstory* and *Greenwood* also employ panoramic and scenic narration similarly as *Barkskins*. In Powers's novel the state of the world's forests is not primarily discussed in panoramic narration, as one would expect for the nature that commonly forms the background to human affairs. Instead, trees are in every single story and manage to make their way into the foreground, in the dialogue of specific scenes. This happens mainly through the introduction of specific tree-obsessed characters, such as dendrologist Patricia Westerford. She continually bring up the subject of trees in conversation with other people and teaches not only them, but also the reader, a lot about the workings of trees. The way they communicate with each other, for example: “wounded trees send out alarms that other trees smell. ... They're linked together in an airborne network, sharing an immune system across acres of woodland. These brainless, stationary trunks are protecting each other” (126). These insights, not told in a quick panoramic overview, but elaborated upon in slow scenes, make trees into charismatic characters, and thus it is all the more devastating for the reader when they are cut down. In *Greenwood*, a leitmotif is the inability of family members from different generations to understand each other. However, in the private dialogue between these characters, their discussions often revolve around trees. In one of the rare conversations between activist Willow Greenwood and her ‘father’, logging company owner Harris

¹⁹ Which shows in an inversive way, by bringing people down to the level where we currently regard trees, that violence can be directed not only against people, but also against trees. *The Overstory* does it the other way around, by lifting up trees to the level of people and showing how they are worth just as much, or even more than humans.

Greenwood, they fight not about ‘human affairs’, but about the impact his company has on the forest. Willow states that “what you’ve destroyed will never come back, Daddy” (82), while Harris ignores her accusations and repeatedly states that “time goes in cycles ... [and] everything comes back again, eventually” (83). In sum, each of these novels does not employ a strictly planetary perspective, but does in fact pay attention to the lives of individuals as well. However, the discussion of their daily lives and human concerns are often used as vehicles to address violence against the forest.

In terms of literary form, the alternation of scenes and panoramic overviews also means that each of the novels contains a lot of accelerations and delays in the ratio between narrative and narrated time. As such, the novels offer a new experience of the difference between human and arboreal temporality and foreground these through specific scenes that show a confrontation between a human character and a tree. *Greenwood* offers a multi-generational but still human experience of time, and explicitly compares this to the long life of a tree. In a determining dialogue between Jake Greenwood and her boss, she raises the issue of the fungal infection of a couple of old-growth trees. The only solution, she maintains, is to cut them down and burn them, to prevent further spreading of the fungus. However, her boss opposes the visible spectacular violence of cutting down the tree, since “The Greenwood Arboreal Cathedral is in the tree *entertainment* business ... The publicity would be a disaster” (468). Even if it means that they accept the slow violence of the gradually spreading fungus: “Like you said, these things spread slowly. Five years is a long time” (468). In the dramatic final scene where Jake cuts down the sick tree, the novel combines a scenic focus on the moment where the tree is cut down with a panoramic view of her life and that of her family, thereby foregrounding the discrepancy between these two timescales. First, the reader is guided to an anthropomorphic reading of trees by means of metaphors such as the description of the tree’s “massive grin” (472), or the way it is “weeping” (473). However, the differences are also foregrounded, for example the fact that “*tree is older than the language [Jake is] thinking in*” (472, emphasis in original).

When Jake finally kneels down next to the felled tree, she traces its twelve hundred rings and tries to find the defining moments in her family’s life: “She begins at this year’s growth, the cambium, and counts backward to the ring that grew the year she first arrived at the Cathedral, which is not even an inch from edge” (473) However, not only their life events are captured in the structure of the tree, but also natural events such as “the drought of the thirties, easily identified by five rings thinner and darker than

the others surrounding them” (474). Jake discovers that the lives of three generations of the Greenwood family easily fit into the life of this one tree, taking up only a fragment of its space, and this discovery makes their different temporalities explicit. When she stops tracing the rings, “she hasn’t even moved eight inches from the edge, and there are still about six feet left before she reaches the centre” (474). The tree is not only far older than Jake herself, but also bears the marks of a history that far surpasses the history of her entire family.

This is one of the final scenes in the novel, which demonstrates how the analogy of the tree is the structuring device in the novel, and Jake’s study of the annual rings conveniently ties the story of the human characters together. A motto by George Nakashima, that the reader is given at the beginning of the novel, emphasizes “the drama in the opening of a log” (n.p.). This opening is something that can only be done after the life of the tree has—violently—ended. However, the annual rings also reveal the life story of the tree, that has been “hidden for centuries” and is now finally foregrounded. Moreover, this scene is crucial because it foregrounds the near perversity of the unequal distribution of power between people and trees. Jake, who is by now aware that the tree she has cut down is more than forty times her age, is suddenly aware of the power she, as a single human being, possesses. That harshly puts everything written in the novel in a different light. Since the novel also begins with Jake’s storyline, these sections significantly enframe and influence the reader’s perception of the other adventures of the Greenwood family.

In *The Overstory*, the continuous alternation of panoramic and scenic narrative also contributes to an inconsistent ratio of narrative time and narrated time. More specifically, trees operate as the subject that mediates between different spatial-temporal scales and specifically foregrounds the relative slowness of trees. As Masiero maintains, since we are told an ‘overstory’ through an implied arboreal narrator, we become “immersed in a present which is somehow stretched to embrace the entire lives of the novel’s characters. This amplified present is not, therefore, the historical present, but rather the narrative counterpart of time looked at from the perspective of a tree” (141). What time looked at from the perspective of a tree is like, is already made explicit in the beginning of *The Overstory*. The novel opens with the family story of Nick Hoel, one of the nine protagonists, and introduces his family’s tradition of photographing the chestnut tree on their farmland. A flipping-through of all these photos compiled in an album showcases the growth of this solo tree “through hundreds of revolving seasons ...

growing at the speed of wood” while “everything a human being might call the story happens outside this photo’s frame” (16). A long passage sums up all the events in the Hoel family that are not captured through the focus on the slow growth of the tree in the photos: “The Depression that costs them two hundred acres and sends half the family to Chicago ... The barn that burns to the ground one night to the screams of helpless animals ... The dozens of joyous weddings, christenings, and graduations. The half dozen adulteries” (16). The tree is persisting through time, while the lives of the Hoel family members pass by fleetingly. As opposed to *Greenwood*, this passage enframes the rest of the narrative and from the beginning sets the tone for the rest of the novel, urging its readers to see trees as living in a temporality that is different from the human chronotope. Moreover, this continuous tone is supported by passages where the old age of trees, especially in relation to humans, is stressed. For example, very significantly Powers describes how “each new tree is its own distinct epic”, with a “unique history, biography, chemistry, economics, and behavioral psychology” (442). Descriptions such as these make the clash between the few minutes it takes a human to cut down such a tree and their centuries-old age all the more stark.

Unlike *The Overstory*, *Barkskins* is not so much concerned with the slowness of trees, as it is with the speed of humanity. More specifically, the formal structure of the novel has implemented the recently accumulated ability of humans to accelerate processes that would normally take much longer to complete. Proulx’s novel covers 320 years in history, from 1693 to 2013, but is quite consistent in dedicating each of its ten 50-100 page parts to around twenty to forty years. The only exception are the last two parts, which take up respectively 110 and 120 years. They start in the mid-nineteenth century, and continue to respectively 1960 and 2013. Through this increase in narrated time, the structure of the novel also reflects two common narratives about the beginning of the Anthropocene, which hold different implications for the role we give humans in the destruction of the planet. If we date the start of the Anthropocene with “the unfolding of the Industrial Revolution, the narrative that emerges is that of the human as an inventor and entrepreneur in a plot of capitalist expansion. If, like the AWG, we date the start to the so-called “Great Acceleration” after the Second World War (and this version is on its way to general acceptance), we are telling the story of an expansive consumer capitalism that spans the globe.” (*Anthropocene* 21). *Barkskins* has implemented both these accelerations in the impact of human behavior to nature in its formal structure by dedicating most of its narrative time to the beginnings of the deforestation crisis instead

of its current state. This is also connected to a third narrative about the beginning of the Anthropocene, which points to the entirety of the narrated time in the novel, namely the idea that the epoch started with the European colonization of North America and the consequent global trade (Lewis and Maslin).

This final focus on the accelerated impact of human behavior also brings into focus the perspective of slow violence. In all three of my case studies, the effects of slow violence are sped up in specific passages in order to make them tangible for the reader. *Barkskins* is especially scrupulous and provides endless enumerations of the dwindling biodiversity due to the destructive behavior of the colonists: “woodlands and fruitful edges that had supplied so many generations with berries and edible roots ... had been plowed up and given over to maize fields and turnips. These French Acadians had drained many of the salt marshes to grow salt hay for their livestock. The larger game animals, moose, caribou and bear, had all retreated. The beaver were greatly reduced in number so severely had they been taken, for their skins could be turned into guns and metal pots” (171). Similarly, the effects of deforestation on the indigenous people, such as alcoholism and prostitution due to extreme poverty and a feeling of uprootedness, are described in detail.

The Overstory puts forward how tree-diseases and plagues have a major impact and can make entire species disappear. For example, by 1940, the same fungus that threatens the Hoel family chestnut has spread, and “four billion trees in native range vanish into myth” (14). In a powerful passage that foregrounds the slowness of certain ecological violence, the novel stresses how twenty years might feel like a long time for an individual human, but from a geological perspective on time can quickly have an extreme impact on the environment: “The hottest year ever measured comes and goes. Then another. Then ten more, almost every one of them among the hottest in recorded history. ... Species disappear. ... Reefs bleach and wetlands dry. ... Forest larger than most countries turns to farmland. Look at the life around you; now delete half of what you see” (374). *Greenwood*, finally, presents a fictional wave of fungal blights and insect infestations called the “Great Withering” (5), which has not only decimated a large part of the world’s forests in less than ten years, but has also made the world practically uninhabitable for humans themselves. However, the novel reveals, these single organisms are not to blame, since the Withering is actually the result of a much slower process. Scientists, *Greenwood* describes, attribute event to “the climate zones changing faster than the trees could adapt, which weakened their ability to defend themselves

against invaders” (10). These changing climate zones—the novel hints at—of course have a connection with our current climate crisis.

Concluding, in all three novels the accelerations and delays in the ratio between narrative time and narrated time foreground experiences of time that are alternatives to the strictly human temporality. *Greenwood* makes a few explicit contradictions of human and arboreal time, but does so in the final part of the novel and does not really integrate these discrepancies throughout the narrative. *The Overstory* does infuse its entire narrative with a feeling for the slowness of trees, presenting them as a stable factor while human lives pass by, thereby showing the difference between them. *Barkskins*, finally, also integrates these temporal differences, but does so the other way around by bringing the focus to the speed at which human lives often move and the subsequent dangerous impact their actions can have on both the human and the non-human world. The employed representational strategy to foreground the difference between the length of a human life and the life of a tree especially makes the reader aware of how individual and planetary perspectives each have a different temporality. The discrepancy between a human experience of time and an arboreal one is stressed, which matters because it demonstrates how not all actions reveal their impact on an individual scale and temporality.

Conclusion

To sum up, through its transformations of the formal qualities of the traditional epic, the dendro-epic, of which *Barkskins*, *The Overstory* and *Greenwood* are three examples, shows a sensitivity to the new requirements of fiction in the era of the Anthropocene. Most importantly, these novels present a different experience of time and space that helps the reader to understand how indirect forms of violence are also violent. Through the inclusion of so many different viewpoints and focalizers, as well as their geographic breadth, they also hint at a planetary scale. The alternation of different narrative forms, and especially the alternation of different times, helps to foreground not only a planetary scale, but also its contrast with a human or individual scale. Finally, the dendro-epic uses specific scenes to show both the causes and direct consequences of certain forms of violence, but different scenes to comment on its larger consequences. Through this, the (structural) violence is not only described as it happens, but especially when it has already happened. However, through the wide spatio-temporal setup of the novel, the reader is also able to trace back what caused it. The answer, of course, is most often ‘humans’.

This structure also helps in representing its indirect effects and making deforestation understandable as a form of slow violence.

What already becomes visible is that *The Overstory* and *Barkskins* have fully implemented these aspects in their innovative structure, while *Greenwood* only loosely reproduces them and mostly employs them as a literary theme. This indicates that even though each novel addresses the violent consequences of deforestation, they do so in different ways. There are other aspects of the traditional epic, such as the leitmotiv, collage (or the broader intertextuality), and allegory that Moretti defines, that also contribute to the representation of deforestation as (structurally) violent. Moreover, in my analyzed novels they serve as thematic devices to address how deforestation is always multidirectional, and how readers are complexly implicated in it themselves. In the following chapter I will use the defined formal aspects of the dendro-epic as a framework to close read specific passages in which the implications of deforestation are addressed. This will also help me to better compare my case studies and define what they do similarly and differently.

Chapter 3

Epic Heroes?

Deforestation and the Figure of the Implicated Subject

In the traditional epic, the protagonists are often war heroes with power and agency. Gilgamesh, Achilles, Beowulf and King Arthur: they are all described as having a great amount of strength, and war battles shift directions when they join or leave. In *The Iliad*, for example, much of the narrative revolves around the disastrous consequences of Achilles' withdrawal from the Trojan War and the attempts to bring him back to the battlefield (Miller 193). Strength, here, means the ability to exert force and the agency to influence a narrative. The storyline of these heroes is central to the development of the narrative and the causality between their actions and the effects are clear. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, in the dendro-epic the discussion of violence has extended itself to include not just the visible and concrete violence in the traditional epic, but also focus on structural and indirect forms of violence. As a consequence, the struggle between the powerful hero and the villain in the traditional epic is replaced with a spectrum of different subject positions, occupied by all kinds of characters. Because of the temporal and spatial distance between cause and effect, in environmental violence agency is also decoupled from intentionality. This means that people might almost never intend their actions to have certain violent effects, but they still do. This is also how they then start to occupy the positions of implication that Rothberg discusses.

In this line, the discussion surrounding the responsibility for deforestation cannot be summed up by focusing on the intentional environmental violence of cutting down trees alone. If we look at the consumption structures that demand deforestation in order to exist, we can better trace our personal roles in it. For example, as I have mentioned earlier, in order to provide the beef that so many people demand, deforestation is required in order to make room for the cattle grazing (Nepstad et al.). However, even for those who are vegetarian, the palm oil, which requires entire forests to be cleared for palm monocultures, is practically impossible to avoid (Harvey). These examples demonstrate the crux of implication: it is nearly impossible to get out of it, and we might not even know we're in it. In this chapter, I will focus on how my case studies, by complicating questions of agency and intentionality, transform their protagonists from (epic) heroes or anti-heroes into implicated subjects. This transformation also

foregrounds how in dendro-epics such as *Greenwood*, *Barkskins*, and *The Overstory*, certain characteristics do not disappear, but are used differently. Moreover, although the heroic role, an important aspect of the classical epic, is transformed here, other aspects of the epic, such as a large scale and focus on violence, remain. Specifically, in this chapter I will zoom in on certain passages to see how these novels enforce a more comprehensive way of thinking about human culpability in relation to deforestation. The reader, by gaining insight into the implicated subject positions of the characters, is stimulated to reflect on their own implication as well. *The Overstory*, *Barkskins* and *Greenwood* all enable these reflections in their own way: by discussing capitalist consumption patterns, showcasing implication through generational benefits, or through making the development of complex implication visible. However, what they all have in common is a focus on the different roles that humanity as a geological force plays in the destruction of the world's forests.

From Hero to Implicated Subject

Apart from its specific formal structure and narration, one of the defining elements of the classical epic is that of the epic hero. Usually being a 'he', the hero has a reputation for being a great warrior and taking a leading role in war battles. This shows how inherently, the epic not only revolves around violence, but also around people's positions towards that violence. Adeline Johns-Putra stresses that the epic hero, despite functioning as a half-god in war battles, is always also vulnerable due to the persisting threat of mortality. Northrop Frye, in his discussion of the different types of fictional heroes, stresses this vulnerability and argues that the epic hero "is superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment" (33). He has both a certain authority and power of expression that is far greater than the common human, but he also subjects to social criticism and the order of nature (34). Lukács similarly stresses the distance between the epic hero and the outside world, but does not frame this as superiority: "The epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual. It is traditionally thought that one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community" (66).

Apart from the aforementioned aspects, the traditional occupation of the epic with organized violence in the form of war and battle, foregrounds the intentionality connected to that violence. In this light, Miller discusses the occupation of the epic hero with "the warrior ideal, encased in the special epic description of his adventures" (viii).

However, this conception of violence is still very anthropocentric. One of Miller's contemporary definitions of the hero, cut loose from its classic connotations, is about the ability to recognize a hero due to his involvement in specific events. With this, he means that someone has "intervened in some critical situation in an extraordinary fashion, acting outside, above, or in disregard to normal patterns of behavior, especially in putting his or her life at risk" (1). This example shows that the involvement of the epic hero with violence is still taken to be event-like and direct. Furthermore, as Miller himself argues, a recurring theme in his work is the persistence "of the violent and of those dead by violence" (379).

However, his discussion of violence as the "supposedly strict taboo against shedding the 'blood of one's brother'" (379)—by which he means interhuman violence—shows how he does not consider interspecies violence at all. In order to bring the focus to ways in which non-human life forms, such as the forest, can also be victims of violence, the planetary scale and arboreal temporality discussed in chapter two is specifically relevant. These literary tools refocus to the way in which the forest, just as well as the human actors, can be viewed as a real and charismatic character in the dendro-epic, and consequently foreground how it can be harmed. In line with the role of the hero in classical epics, each of the novels I discuss presents the forest as simultaneously above the merely-human world, but also as extremely vulnerable to it. In that sense, the dendro-epic also knows a tragic dimension: its hero exists in a hostile environment that is determined to destroy them, no matter the struggle.

More contemporary and often humanist adaptations of the epic form, such as the type that Moretti defines, offer a hero in the form of a rational human subject. Because they cannot meet the requirements of the totalizing will of the epic, they are often described as anti-heroes. However, as Stephen Kern describes, the new kind of hero in the modern and often realist novel is never just anti, but rather neo-heroic (34). This means that they define their heroism not in terms of the battles they have won, but rather as a heroism of the self. As Johns-Putra argues, "the polyvalence of subjectivity is, in the twentieth century, the defining characteristic of the epic" (8). However, even if the modern epic hero has moved away from the battlefield, he is not disengaged from violence. This is important because looking at the full extent of the causes of deforestation means to focus on, as Rothberg describes it, the "diffusion of agency in structural injustices" (51). Agency becomes more indirect and gets refigured as the capacity to have impact, which is something that can also take place without intention.

Regardless of these complications of intentionality, they do not exonerate the human characters from their implication in deforestation. However, people still need stories about humans—about themselves—to gain more insight into their own implicated subject positions. Here the epic form, which allows us to focus on both the individual and the planetary scale, is useful.

Albeit differently, all of the three novels I discuss demonstrate both individual actions and their implications on a larger scale. In what follows, I will select one character from each of these novels and discuss their specific actions. In *The Overstory*, Douglas Pavlicek becomes driven to personally save the forests and even imagines himself in the footsteps of heroes like Gilgamesh and King Arthur. However, his seemingly heroic actions are eventually outed as contributing to the continuation of the same harmful practices against which he battles. In *Barkskins*, Sapatisia Sel seeks to live in complete harmony with nature and has made it her life's mission to undo the destructive changes that people have made to the forest. However, the fact that Sapatisia is also a descendant of the same people that were responsible for these destructions in the first place, arguably makes fun of her absolute heroic position. In *Greenwood*, Everett Greenwood saves an abandoned child from death and takes her on an epic train-hopping journey across North America. He goes to great lengths trying to protect her from those who are after her and even offers up his own reputation, which puts him in jail, in order to keep her safe. However, most of these actions he is only able to carry out by virtue of the support system of the logging company of his brother Harris. Even though their actions are well-intended, each of these characters is also connected to the harmful practice of deforestation. In each of these cases, as I will now argue, the concept of the implicated subject best describes the reality of this entanglement.

Addressing Bystandership

The Overstory, while presenting specific human behavior such as logging or very violent police actions as wrong, never takes these specific actions as its primary point of focus. Instead, it focuses on what the novel formulates as the main cause of deforestation, namely people's failed imagination to see the forest as valuable in its own right, beyond being a consumption good. The novel does so by implementing these ideas very explicitly in the characters' dialogue, for example when as a young child, Patricia Crawford's father tells her that the reason people can't see the value of trees is because they're "Plant-blind. Adam's curse. We only see things that look like us" (114). Thus, the novel seems to

express, we need to find ways to make trees more visible and valuable in their own right. In this line, *The Overstory* frequently mentions how these wrongful thought patterns are common to the global North. Thinking differently also leads to acting differently, that's what the novel seems to express. *The Overstory* discusses specific individual behavior by zooming in on nine specific human characters and the ambiguity of their actions. Each of them represents a different possible response to the complexity of eco-consciousness in the present-day world: activism, for example, or on the contrary acceptance, or even suicide.

One of these characters is Douglas Pavlicek, who keeps getting recruited in different roles and goes from being a prisoner, to a soldier, to a seedling planter and an activist. However, his role is never as straightforward as one would expect: as a prisoner he is innocent, as a soldier he does not contribute to the actual fighting, and as an activist he makes mistakes that later prove to actually work against the cause he is fighting for. As a result, Douglas is never a clear victim or perpetrator in the events he gets involved in, but always complexly implicated in them. To recall: Rothberg describes complex implication as “the experience of occupying positions that align one both to histories of victimization and to histories of perpetration” (91). In reality, this often means that people have had experiences of trauma and victimization in the past, but are structurally implicated in (slow) violence and inequality. For Douglas, it is a series of traumatic experiences that lead him to think differently about the value of trees. The reader is first introduced to him when he is arrested and charged with armed robbery. However, the situation quickly reveals itself to be different than at first sight. At nineteen, Douglas, who is orphanized and tight on money, decides to participate in the Stanford Prison Experiment: to him, “[F]ifteen bucks a day for two straight weeks is a lot of dough, for doing nothing” (73). Not being afraid of “a little amateur theater” (75), Douglas becomes Prisoner 571 for two weeks. Each of the participants arbitrarily gets put in the position of either guard or prisoner, but as the descriptions of the experiment quickly reveal, the reality is not so two-dimensional.

At the same rate as Douglas slowly starts to realize that he is being lied to, and the experiment is really about something else than what he has been told, the violent behavior of the guards also worsens. Prisoners get put up against each other by the guards and get abused, until the experiment gets called off because “[s]ome big-brained scientist in a position of authority at last wakes up and realizes people can't do this” (77). That person is not Douglas, however, who quietly accepts his role. Staying low, he does

not become violent himself, but he also doesn't intervene when his fellow prisoners need help. After participating in this experiment, Douglas has effectively experienced what it is like to be at the tail end of people making violent decisions merely because they can—and also demonstrated to the reader the arbitrariness of such processes. He has experienced what it is like to be treated badly for no reason at all and should have been a classic victim of the experiment—the prisoners even get described as such. However, this absolute position is troubled due to decisions he made during his time in jail: “He will now, forever, be the guy who wouldn't take sides and didn't surrender his blanket”(78). Effectively, Douglas has experienced what it is like to be a bystander to instances of violence, and even blames himself for it. If anything, the experiment shows that there are no clear victims in situations like these and challenges the accuracy of labels such as victim and perpetrator.

The inclusion of the description of this prison experiment in a story about trees might seem odd, but it can in fact be read—in line with the exuberant use of analogy in the traditional epic—as an analogy for the deforestation crisis. Significantly, the experiment demonstrates the dynamics of violence that unfold when people are put in various positions of power and powerlessness. The description of Douglas' role in the experiment carefully sets the tone to see how in such situations, there are often no clear victims or perpetrators, but plenty of bystanders that do not take action. The bystander effect refers to the way in which people are less likely to offer help in a critical situation when other people are present (Darley and Latané). This also—significant in the context of the epic—prevents them from being ‘heroes’ in the classical sense. The discussion of the bystander effect in *The Overstory* maps onto deforestation because the effect is nowadays being revisited in the context of the climate crisis, to explain inaction towards global warming (Booth; MacLean). This could of course be extended to deforestation, however, I would argue that the further people are removed from the actual harm, the more difficult it is to say that they are bystanders—rather, they are implicated subjects. *The Overstory*, now having set the tone with the discussion of Douglas' bystandership in a strictly human situation, continues by portraying his role in situations where he does get confronted with nature. As the story continues, Douglas's role remains ambiguous, but it grows increasingly more difficult to see the direct relation between his actions and the potentially destructive consequences. Through tracing these developments, *The Overstory* shows how an implicated subject position gets constituted over time.

Freshly out of ‘prison’, Douglas realizes that “something is distinctly fucked up in the status quo” (78). Determined to make a change, he signs up for the army, where he soon takes up the same indifferent attitude as during the Stanford Prison experiment. Douglas gains the rank of Technical Sergeant and works as a loadmaster filling transport flights with “Class A explosives” (78) and consequently “loading up return flights with body bags” (79). Working closely with the explosive material, Douglas is aware of their violent connection with the body bags, but does not really care. Similarly, he is aware of the ecological devastation as a result of the Vietnam War since he expresses that a couple of years ago, his flight route “was still green all the way across the rivers to the South China Sea. Then came the shitstorms of rainbow herbicides, the twelve million gallons of that modified plant hormone, Agent Orange.” (80). This comment refers to the powerful herbicides used by U.S. forces in Vietnam with the intention of eliminating the forest covers of Viet Cong troops. It is something that happened at a long distance in various ways: the destruction is done by American soldiers but takes place outside of the U.S., and Douglas literally sees it happening from a distance, up in the sky in his airplane. Even though he is not the one actually using the herbicides, he contributes to it nevertheless with his job in the cargo that supports these practices. The discussion of Douglas’s involvement with Agent Orange, which is a classic example of slow violence, demonstrates how even actions where people are not aware of their violent consequences, can still be harmful on the longer run.²⁰

The descriptions of Douglas’s participation in the Stanford Prison experiment and the Vietnam war already foreground two different situations where he could have made a change, but doesn’t. The point of these insights is, of course, that for Douglas this is his entire life, and so he himself does not have the overarching perspective that is required to gain insight into his behavior and its connection to other issues such as deforestation. For the reader, on the other hand, this is just one storyline in a story that goes on about people’s inability to see the value of trees, and how they therefore simply stand by while the trees are destroyed. Through offering passages that discuss bystandership, the reader is invited to make this connection. However, not only the terms of victim and perpetrator, which get troubled through the discussion of Douglas’s participation in the

²⁰ More than forty years after the end of the Vietnam War, the herbicide still knows dramatic effects. More than one million Vietnamese suffer from health issues or deformities, and the poison will continue to interfere with the genetic code of up to twelve generations of people. See “The Children of Agent Orange”, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/dateline/the-forgotten-victims-of-agent-orange>.

Stanford Prison experiment, but also the label of the bystander cannot accurately describe the contexts of environmental violence in which he is put. In these scenes, he is never just a bystander, since it is not only his inaction that allows the violence to continue, but also the actions he actually performs that unintendedly contribute to deforestation, making him implicated in the process.

While still in Vietnam, the plane in which Douglas is flying gets bombarded and catches fire. By managing to get all the pallets out of the plane before they ignite, Douglas effectively saves the lives of his crewmates. However, the way in which Douglas gets celebrated in the after-battle report as a war hero and receives an important medal are no longer of use when his “veteran’s disability” (86) means he can no longer contribute anything to the Air Force and he gets sent home. A couple of years later, while working odd jobs, Douglas gets into literature and becomes fascinated by life in the wilderness and away from civilization. However, on his first attempt to “keep heading west” (86), he gets confronted with the reality of clear cutting and the destruction of national forests. Affected by the lone stroke of virgin forest left, Douglas feels like he’s on the Cedar Mountain from *Gilgamesh* but soon gets confronted with the reality that “Gilgamesh and his punk friend Enkidu have already been through and trashed the place” (88). In an attempt to contribute to forest regeneration, he takes on a job planting Douglas-fir seedlings back into stripped land, whilst knowing that “he’s slinging trees for middlemen to the same fuckers who cut down the primordial gods to begin with. But he doesn’t have to vanquish the lumber industry or even get nature’s revenge. He just needs to earn a living” (89).

Nevertheless, Douglas, likes to see himself as an epic hero on a mission to save the forest, and wakes up experiencing how “dawn breaks in Arthurian mists” (89). Through the epic references to both *Gilgamesh* and King Arthur, *The Overstory* explicitly interacts—and arguably makes fun of—the epic genre. Douglas might like to see himself as a hero, but *The Overstory* suggests otherwise, for example through a description of his stay in “tree-planter camps filled with hippies and illegals” (89) that closely resembles the logging camps that have housed forest workers throughout North American history. Additionally, Douglas’s motives soon get outed as not intrinsically about the state of the forest at all, as he is merely uncomfortable with the sight of a logged landscape and just wants to “undo the look of those cuts” (89). His well-intended actions only mean he is contributing to that same “little voter’s curtain” (87) of trees that he got so affected by in the beginning. Additionally, as Douglas later gets told, the trees will just get cut down

again: “You’re putting in babies so they can kill grandfathers. And when your seedlings grow out, they’ll be monocrop blights” (186). Therefore, Douglas’s tree-planting still supports the capitalist consumption pattern that causes deforestation in the first place. Since he does not see the violent consequences of his actions happening in real-time, the label of the bystander does not do justice to his entanglement in these harmful practices. However, the reader is by now conscious of the comprehensive framework of global deforestation in which Douglas’ actions have a place. They can therefore also draw the conclusion that Douglas, through the distance between his actions and their results, is in fact implicated in the practice of deforestation.

Douglas, now aware of the real consequences of planting seedlings, still has trouble with effectively addressing his own implication in larger-scale deforestation. After finding out the truth about the tree planting project he worked in, he becomes desperate and takes to a pine forest to be comforted by the trees. He gets woken up by loggers who take him to be an activist and hand him over to the police. Consequently, after being charged for civil disobedience, Douglas reads up on guerrilla forestry and decides to become a real activist, letting himself be recruited for this job just as with his earlier work. Describing possible solutions to dealing with the implicated subject position, Rothberg calls for a “multidirectional politics of differentiated, long-distance solidarity” (203), which is more effective than either identity politics or an absolute separation between different locations and histories. This shows when Douglas’, while performing direct actions as an activist, is confronted with loggers. Douglas, a white male of equal age as the loggers of whom the reader knows that his life history is actually not that far off from that of the loggers, could have addressed their similarities to gain their understanding, but instead stresses only how they are different. For example when Douglas marks the stumps of trees that have been logged, writing down “CUT DOWN WHILE YOU SLEPT” (206), this action is mostly met with laughter and anger from local loggers, who respond with remarks such as “My timber job pays for your welfare checks” (231).

The created clash between the loggers and the Douglas’s activism is foregrounded even better when the former respond in the same type of language as the activists, namely by holding up “hand-lettered signs as well. LOGGERS: THE REAL ENDANGERED SPECIES. EARTH FIRST! WE’LL LOG THE OTHER PLANETS LATER” (239). These signs are interesting because they demonstrate how the cause has a similar urgency for the loggers as for the activists. In an attempt to challenge Douglas, the loggers articulate all the reservations and nuances the reader might raise against the activists’ motives. For example, they stress

that the logging is worse elsewhere in the world and that they are also replanting trees: “You know where the *real* problems are? Brazil. China. That’s where the crazy cutting is. You should go protest down there. See what they think when you tell them they can’t get as rich as we are” (244). To this remark, Douglas responds that what the loggers are doing is also wrong, because they are “cutting down the last American old growth” (244). However, the loggers respond skeptically, and also show that Douglas doesn’t know much about the forest at all, thereby suggesting that his care for the forest is fake: “You wouldn’t know old growth if it fell on you. We’ve been cutting these hillsides for decades, and we’ve been replanting. Ten trees for each one we cut” (244). Because Douglas does not address his complex implication, but chooses to take up the identity of an activist, he is not able to cross the barrier between him and the loggers. As a result his actions change nothing, and both the activists and loggers are “ignorant armies going up against each other as they have forever” (241).

A better way of dealing with implication, in line with Rothberg’s arguments, is to both emphasize our similarities as humans—and how we are therefore all in the same self-destructive boat—but also by continuing to emphasize our personal implication. From each of the novels I discuss, *The Overstory* strongest expresses the idea that all humans are somehow implicated in deforestation, simply because humanity as a whole is. They are implicated through the thought pattern that views the main importance of trees as being either a consumption good or an object of beauty. More specifically, they fail to see the potential of trees that “left alone—and there’s the catch—left alone to the air and light and rain, each one might put on tens of thousands of pounds” (90). Offering no way to escape this uncomfortable message, *The Overstory* does not present a pretty end for humanity. The world to humans is disappearing, so if the human race wants to survive they have to change their behavior, that’s what the novel expresses. By showing the consequences of either the inaction or the well-intended actions of characters like Douglas, *The Overstory* demonstrates how it is precisely the act of being unaware that implicates people in the eventual collective eco-suicide of humanity. The reader, however, through having been able to trace the consequences of Douglas’ behavior in different contexts, is aware of this implication and inspired to reflect on their own position as well.

Long-Distance Legacies and a Clash of Two Cultures

Barkskins centers around a dichotomy between two very different relationships with the (forested) environment. Firstly, that of the non-hierarchical contact following the ways of

the indigenous Mi'kmaw people: "where we, the plants, animals and birds are all persons together who help each other – fresh in our thoughts and lives" (181). Secondly, that of the capitalist mechanisms that only pursue profit and are destructive towards the natural environment. An important representational strategy of the novel is to portray these approaches as interlaced in a progressively worsening conflict. It does so by introducing two different family lines, one starting with René Sel and one starting with Charles Duquet, and tracing their developing relationships with the forest over time. While the latter runs away from his direct responsibilities as a worker and becomes the successful business owner of the timber empire called Duke and Sons, the former stays in the forest and marries an indigenous woman. However, in the three hundred years that follow, the battle for land between diverse colonizers means that they are estranged from their homeland, and it becomes increasingly impossible for them to continue their native way of life that depends on the environment of the forest. These forms of slow violence impoverish them, and in their struggle to survive they are forced to let themselves be hired as 'barkskins'. At the time, being such a lumber worker is one of the most profitable and attainable jobs in the area, and the Sels find themselves working for the same timber companies that are clearing the forests in which—parts of—their families live. As a result, René Sel's descendants will always find themselves on the border of the Mi'kmaw tribe—with the associated traditional ecological sensitivity—of their mother on the one hand, and a more Western lifestyle on the other hand.²¹ By making this family line explicit, *Barkskins* does not only discuss these two separate ways of interacting with the forest, but also foregrounds the impossibility of keeping them completely separated.

The dichotomy between a capitalist and an indigenous relationship with the forest is also integrated in the formal structure of *Barkskins*. The different sections in the novel alternately trace the Sel or the Duquet/Duke families, and discuss the different phases in their lives. For example the phase when all male Sel family members start to work "in the lumber camps" (267), or "the glory days" (451) of the Duke family. Being connected at their core, since René Sel and Charles Duquet knew each other very well, at some point the story about each of these families is once again influenced by the other, and they start to intertwine. From this point on the sections about the Sel and Duke families keep

²¹ *Barkskins* has been critiqued for idealizing the Mi'kmaw, but I would argue that the novel mostly shows how some people in fact might want to idealize indigenous-environmental relations as somehow more pure. However, the impossibility to do so persists due to a complex reality that also implicates indigenous people in deforestation.

alternating, even though they are also getting more and more involved with each other. Thus, the construction of this novel also shows the artificiality of such a dichotomy.

The final pages of the novel, which show the family trees of the respective family members, are the most explicit about the connection of the Sels and Dukes. These family trees—ironically the only ‘trees’ in *Barkskins* that still thrive as the centuries go by—help to place all characters in the novel, either from the main story line or from side branches, in connection to each other. Sometimes the family tree reveals earlier marriages, children, or divorces that are not mentioned in the actual story at all. The family trees also overlap at certain points, most visible through the union of Beatrix Duquet and Kuntaw Sel. The family trees are especially useful because they show readers which storylines to connect with each other, even if the narrative itself does not link them together, for example because they are so temporally distant. This is also how the reader learns about the complicated descendancy of the present-day characters with whom the novel ends, namely Sapatisia Sel and her cousins Jeanne and Felix. Despite their indefatigable commitment to recovering the forest, the novel expresses the sense that even this final effort might well be in vain.

Sapatisia Sel is a hybrid character because even though she profiles herself as an ecologically minded activist with an indigenous heritage, her past legacies also connect her to the destructive behavior of the Duke family. The reader learns that Sapatisia’s father, Edgar-Jim Sel, is unresponsive to his wife’s attempts at making him see the multidirectional connection between “feminist emergence from an oppressive past and his own life and renunciation of Mi’kmaw particularity” (679). Edgar-Jim is raised as a Mi’kmaw, but wants to leave behind the traumatic experience of growing up in a family determined by alcoholism and general feelings of uprootedness and uselessness—which are all slowly violent effects of deforestation on native American people. His wife’s refusal to understand this leads to an interesting dialogue in which she addresses the importance of acknowledging one’s heritage: “You can’t put away what you are. Your parents, your brothers and sisters. And all the generations behind them, your people ... It is you, your heritage, what you came from, it *cannot* be something else” (680). Since this passage introduces Sapatisia, her mother’s statement also directs the attention of the reader to the struggle between acknowledging one’s heritage or putting it away.

The discussion of this struggle also brings back the function of the illustrated family tree, which apart from being a reading-aid also helps the reader to know more about Sapatisia’s family line than she does herself. It thus figures as a way to give the

reader an overview on the complex web of implication in the Duke-Sel family line. More specifically, what neither Sapatisia nor her parents know, but the reader does—thanks to the family tree—is that Sapatisia is not only a descendant of her mother’s Wôpanâak people and her father’s Mi’kmaw people, but also, through her father’s bloodline, of both René Sel and Charles Duquet. Her great grandfather Kuntaw was the grandson of René Sel, while her great grandmother Beatrice Duquet was the granddaughter of Charles Duquet. Sapatisia is complexly implicated in deforestation because ancestors on one side of her family saw themselves forced by the poor economy to work as loggers but felt very conflicted about this, and more directly implicated because another one of her forefathers was the founder of the same logging company for which her other forefathers worked.

Sapatisia’s situation is a prime example of what Rothberg, in words adopted from Simona Forti, calls the “transmission belts of domination” (200). As he describes, implicated subjects take an active role in the “machinery of political violence, economic exploitation, and ecological devastation” (200). The transmission of implication can go on negatively for centuries, or be stopped and its direction changed positively when addressed. Sapatisia, being very sensitive to the state of the world’s forests, is portrayed as a radical ecologist who at first believes that “the forests, the trees, they can change everything” (712). She feels a “personal guilt for eroded slopes and dirt rivers”, and “has a female urge to repair the damage humans have done to nature” (683). In order to contribute to this repairing, Sapatisia takes an interest in the native American part of her family history. She idealizes them, especially their knowledge about ancient medicinal plants, but it is later revealed that the indigenous part of her family knows nothing about them anymore. Sapatisia grows bitter about her interest in indigenous medicinal plants when she learns that they grew in a different world in which they “were surrounded by strong healthy trees, trees that no longer exist, trees replaced by weak and diseased specimens” (696). The strictly separated Mi’kmaw identity seems to have disappeared together with those trees, and only hybrid characters remain.

Sapatisia feels very strongly about contemporary inequality, and also addresses her personal material implication in deforestation. Owning “a small unpainted house on the edge of the sea” (695), she lives away from civilization on Cape George in Nova Scotia and actively tries to stay away from destructive consumption patterns. She does not own much furniture for example, “the only table in the room looked like it had been stolen from a provincial park” (696), and Jeanne and Felix see her wearing “a heavy

grey sweater that looked like it had been knitted from fog and briars” (695). However, regardless of these good intentions, later descriptions of Sapatisia show the reader that leaving consumerism completely behind is practically impossible. She needs her “red pickup” (702) to get to the isolated Tree Project site, uses white paper sheets and laptops for her research, and eats from plastic plates for practical reasons. Since all these actions are also in one way or another harmful to the environment, the description of Sapatisia’s (lack of) consumer behavior demonstrates how there is basically no position in the world that is not implicated in some kind of structural or slow violence.

Nevertheless, Sapatisia keeps idealizing indigenous relationships with the environment, especially liking the idea that the people working with the tree project are “the children of indigenous forest residents. Dispossessed people who lived in forests for millennia until recently are the ones who step forward to do the repair work. They are the ones who best understand how to heal the forest” (706). However, as the story reveals, this purity is an impossibility, a fable. This is revealed, for example, through a discussion between Sapatisia’s parents that shows how even before the Sel and Duke family lines began, the Mi’kmaq were not the peaceful nature folk that Sapatisia imagines them to be: “Do you not know that the Mi’kmaq came here and fought my people? Before the whitemen? ... Mi’kmaq warriors took the whole New England coast” (679). In this line, Rothberg stresses the importance “to acknowledge and map implication in order to reopen political struggles beyond the defensive purity of self-contained identities.” (201). Even though well-intended, Sapatisia’s identity as an ‘indigenous forest saver’ is similarly rigid. Here the story also offers commentary on how there are two possible relationships towards the forest, capitalist and indigenous, but how a pure line never exists. Therefore, *Barkskins* argues, we are always somehow participating in this capitalist consumption pattern, if only through the legacy of our family, as Sapatisia’s story shows.

Sapatisia’s ignorance towards the history of her own family also affects those that come after her. As Rothberg argues, the actions of individual subjects matter, but people only become effective agents of change—in a positive or negative manner—when they act in concert with others (200). Felix and Jeanne, Sapatisia’s cousins, take a similar interest in medicinal plants, also idealizing them, and trace her down. They get invited to join Sapatisia in the Breitsprecher Tree Project²² and learn a great deal from her about forest regeneration, but never learn about the actual history of their family. As a result,

²² Interestingly, this company in itself is also diachronically implicated in deforestation since it has its origins in the Duke and Sons logging company.

the pattern of the idealization of indigenous people doesn't get broken, but the novel hints at the possibility of this eventually happening. For example, Felix and Jeanne discover that Sapatisia was married in an earlier phase of her life unknown to them (701), which is a direct connection to the idea that there might be more to her personal history than is revealed at first sight, such as her (and their) connection to the Duke bloodline. More concretely, Jeanne comments to Felix that she "was going to ask if that idea of idyllic tribes living in wild forestland isn't a myth, like the myth of pristine primeval forest before the whitemen came" (706).

The storylines of the Duke and Sel families each know their separate endings. The former ends with the shutting down of the Breitsprecher-Duke "plywood and fiberboard" (665) business. With the expansion of the Duke family with the more ecologically-minded Breitsprechers, of which the younger generation "wanted nothing to do with the plywood company," (665) the company proves to be unsustainable in the longer run. The Sel storyline ends with the Breitsprecher Tree Project, of which Sapatisia is one of the founders. The Breitsprechers thereby form a connection that direct both the Duke and Sel family to a more sustainable future. *Barkskins* has been critiqued for not bringing the plotlines of the Sel and Duke families together, since the characters never address their commonalities themselves. Adam Mars-Jones, for example, writes in a review that "it's perverse to abandon a plot line that might pull together a novel whose corsetry badly needs tighter lacing". However, I would argue that the focus on the Breitsprechers does in fact, on a larger scale, demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Sel and Duke families. However, the refusal of the characters to concretely explore and address either indigenous or colonial parts of their family histories could be read as the way in which *Barkskins* narrates the difficulty of addressing diachronic implication.

The main representative strategy in *Barkskins* for enforcing self-reflexivity among the readers is to place the blame of deforestation on capitalism. In the portrayal of individual characters, a great deal of attention is paid to their capitalist consumption patterns but also, as the discussion of Sapatisia's behavior shows, the impossibility of completely getting out of this. Through these elaborate discussions, the novel stimulates the reader to reflect on their own consumption patterns and the violent effects this could have. Additionally, this brings the (distant) contemporary destruction of deforestation closer to home. Novels such as Proulx's show her Western audience that it is not something that is only happening elsewhere, as their own countries, specifically in North America, are also built on deforestation practices that displaced and killed Native

Americans. Thus, seeing how North Americans are implicated in the deforestation in their own countries also means addressing the colonial history connected to this. Seeing how someone as ecologically minded as Sapatisia is also diachronically implicated in deforestation is important because it shows how complex, even multidirectional, the issue is. Not addressing this accurately would mean ignoring how the practice of deforestation is also connected to other issues such as the ongoing disposessions of colonial violence.

The Act of Reading Itself

Both *The Overstory* and *Barkskins* provide the reader with more insight into the—often unknown—implicated subject positions of their characters. *The Overstory* demonstrates implication as a result of (in)action, and *Barkskins* focuses on implication through familial origin. Readers may also be stimulated to reflect on how they themselves are synchronically and diachronically implicated by understanding the implication of the characters. However, they still have the option of finding excuses that explain their lack of personal implication, and read on without reflecting on themselves as implicated in deforestation. Moreover, it might also be too difficult for someone reading a novel to right away entangle the ways—apart from their consumer behavior—in which they also contribute to deforestation. In this context, *Greenwood* offers a more intrusive perspective because the novel reflects very explicitly on the material implications of reading books. Since the reader is inevitably participating in the act of reading, reflecting on implication really becomes inescapable.

The most concrete cause of deforestation in *Greenwood* is the event of The Great Withering, “the wave of fungal blights and insect infestations that rolled over the world’s forests ten years ago, decimating hectare after hectare” (5). Although this description is speculative in nature, since this supposedly happens in 2038, blights like this have happened already and will continue to happen at larger scales due to globalization. A representative strategy through which the novel foregrounds this, is by embedding the narrative in real historical events, which is often the case in the classical epic form as well. Significantly, each of the storylines corresponds with a period in the American history of (economic) crisis. The most obvious connection is the height of the Great Depression in 1934, but the storylines take place in the years 1908 and 2008 also refer to a peak of economic crisis. Furthermore, the 1974-section refers to the oil crisis and resulting stock market crash that were at their height around 1974. In a similar way, The Great Withering

is also explicitly connected to an economic crisis. When in the 2038 storyline, very symbolically, the General Sherman²³—the world’s biggest tree—falls to the forest floor rotted by fungus, “the dark symbolism of the event knocks the economy into a tail-spin, kicking off the Withering-induced economic collapse” (21).

However, in a more abstract sense *Greenwood* portrays the main reason for deforestation as a failure of people to learn from each other. This leads to wrongful decisions, also where the forest is concerned, about how to interact with it. The main representative strategy for this is a focus on the difficult communication between the multiple generations of the Greenwood family. The main problem with learning from earlier generations, *Greenwood* seems to say, is that humans tend to view time as linear instead of circular, as the rings of a tree that surround each other. This becomes especially clear through the structure of the novel, which resembles the cross section of a tree. This is made explicit through the detailed illustration in the beginning of the novel, which functions like a table of contents and shows the different parts of the story written on the annual rings. We start in 2038 at the edge, go back to the core in 1908 and then work our way back to the other edge in 2038. This also means that the storyline in 2038, which explains the consequences of The Great Withering, enframes the remaining part of the narrative. Thus *Greenwood* offers a description of circular time that stresses that events are never repeated in exactly the same way. In this case, the situation worsens with every new generation like an upward spiral, which is comparable to the idea of the Great Acceleration in the Anthropocene.

This becomes especially important when looking at the influence of the actions of specific characters, such as Everett Greenwood. The reader first learns about him through the storylines of other characters, for example when in 1974 his ‘niece’ Willow has to pick him up from prison. Everett’s own storyline begins, together with the Great Depression, in 1934, but we only learn about his roots in the 1908-part of the novel that comes after. As a result, the reader learns about the effects of Everett’s actions before we see him conduct them. Furthermore, even though he isn’t alive for the entirety of the narrated time of the novel, Everett influences every layer of the story, either because he inspires

²³ This is no fictional name, but a real-world reference to the giant sequoia tree located in the Giant Forest of Sequoia National Park in California, whose name refers to American general William Sherman. By referring to general Sherman who fought in the American Civil War, this tree also demonstrates Sherman’s connection to the history of slavery in the US and thereby serves as a figure of multidirectional memory.

the other characters to follow up on his actions, or because he serves as a bad example to them and inspires them to do differently. This means that every layer of time, represented by a part of the novel, shows what effect his actions have had. This structure makes visible how Everett's implicated subject position develops over time and is therefore, in line with Rothberg's argument, not only synchronic but also diachronic.

The storyline of Everett Greenwood starts on April 29th in 1908, when at nearly nine years old he is one of the two survivors of a train crash. He is found together with Harris Greenwood, but they are not brothers. Since the CN Railway Company does not want to take responsibility for the victims of the crash, and the local villagers are unable to locate any surviving family, they find a home for Everett and Harris with a local woman living in the forested area nearby. From then on, the boys are treated as brothers and receive the surname Greenwood. As young boys, they become attached to a specific woodlot in the area, which will form the basis for the later Greenwood Island. As they grow up, Harris and Everett both remain attached to the forest, but develop this interest in very different and arguably problematic ways. Harris becomes the wealthy owner of the Greenwood Timber company, trading with Japan and pulping trees to supply "all the Canadian periodicals, and half the major U.S. book imprints" (149). Everett, however, joins the army and goes along with his regiment to First World War France. There he takes up odd jobs in woodworking to avoid talking to his fellow soldiers, with whom he feels he has nothing in common. He prefers this work to "regular soldiering, though it felt bizarre to work with wood in such a wasted, treeless landscape" (144).²⁴

These uncomfortable feelings are Everett's first confrontation with the reality of deforestation, and especially the way in which wood, when removed from its arboreal source, becomes merely a production material in the eye of many people. After his carpentry work is done, Everett volunteers as a stretcher-bearer, picking up stray limbs of fellow soldiers killed in gruesome battles: "As bullets tore through the air, he'd dash out into the corpse-strewn patch that lay between them and the enemy to drag the wounded back, travois-style" (144). This description of Everett's role in the army, which comes directly after the report of his woodworking job, shows how even though not directly partaking in them, he is still involved in violent events and benefitting from his status as a soldier. Similarly, even though not directly involved in Harris' logging business, the

²⁴ The treelessness of the landscape refers to France's forests during the First World War. Already in a bad state due to the demands of the rising industry from the nineteenth century onward, they took another major hit through not only the large projectiles used in battles, but also the logistical demands of the war.

“armour of wealth” (319) of his brother still provides Everett with a safety net. Everett, even though benefiting from this wealth created by virtue of logged trees, never confronts Harris with the destructive reality behind his business. However, the reader, having learned about the future scarcity of trees through Jake’s storyline, is in fact alerted to this.

A more specific way in which Everett is implicated in deforestation, is through his participation in a ‘wood culture’ that is comparable to the petroculture as described by Stephanie LeMenager. Through supporting certain consumption patterns he contributes to the deforestation of the forest, which happens at least partly due to the demand for wood. While in prison, Everett starts working as a carpenter because he really loves the forested area he grew up in, and the materiality of wood reminds him of those trees. His good intentions are shown by the objects he creates, such as “ten thousand birdhouses, and some shelves for the prison library” (87). In 1934, the demand for wood is viewed as unproblematic, because trees are not sparse yet. However, because the reader has first learned about the Great Withering through Jake’s storyline, the impact of the wood consumption culture is already known. By being presented with a novel that conveniently bundles both Everett’s actions and their cumulative effects in different times, the reader is able to see the unintentional implication that Everett is oblivious to. One of the most concrete examples of participation in a wood culture, is when Everett and his then girlfriend Temple plant a few willow trees on their farmland. They treat and look after them with care, only to log them years later to use as material for their caskets (429). Even though this is meant to be romantic, the focus on the material in the description makes it seem almost perverse.

Since Everett is unaware of his own implicated subject position, he never addresses it and its effects continue in the next generations. Through the memories of Liam Greenwood in 2008, we learn that in 1984 he spends three months with Temple and Everett on their farm, and has a much better time than with his own mother. Liam spends his days watching Everett at work in his woodshop and learns to appreciate woodworking: “His great-uncle isn’t destroying trees at all; he’s transforming them, into useful things that will endure” (424). Even though well-intentioned, humanity’s wish to transform trees into something of use to them by literally de-foresting the forest shows their synchronic implication in the destruction of the world’s forest, dispersed over time. Through Jake Greenwood’s earlier storyline, of course, we have already come to know the effects of the Great Withering, and how—forced by the horrible circumstances—

humans finally learn to appreciate trees in their natural form, and not just as a desk or a chair. Of course this means that the main function of the forest is still perceived as being of use to humans. The hypocrisy in this is foregrounded when Jake mentions the irony of rich executives and celebrities that travel to the forest reserve for a spiritual replenishment, “only so that they can return rejuvenated to lives that are either directly or indirectly parboiling our planet, thereby further dooming such natural wonders as these very sacred trees they claim to revere” (13).

A final representative strategy that enforces self-reflexivity about their personal implication among the readers, is through discussing the act of reading books. The first chapter of *Greenwood*, which takes place in 2038, discusses how paper books have become extremely rare post-Withering. Villa Twelve, “with its fine timber-frame construction and unobstructed ocean view” (25), is the most luxurious accommodation on Greenwood Island. When Jake enters it for the first time, “everywhere she looks is the finest furniture of Danish teak, and there’s a real woodstove with an actual fire burning inside, and on the north wall is a giant bookshelf that displays what must be a thousand genuine paperbooks—all surrounded by beautifully intricate old-growth post and beam construction that’s surely priceless” (26). What has happened to the books is that the majority of them were “pulped for wood fibre to produce such essentials as dust masks, air filters, and currency” (26). A similar description of a time when paper was a common resource returns when Jake picks up the diary of her grandmother Willow: “The paper itself is the colour of roasted almonds, but has a sturdiness to it, born of a time when trees were an inexhaustible resource, limitless in number. A time when a person soaked up a spill with a whole roll of paper towels, or printed her entire thesis one-sided (as she had) on a fat stack of snow-white loose-leaf” (37). Significantly, the attention on the materiality of the paper foregrounds its original source.

With this future status of paper in mind, Everett’s carefree consumption of the paper books he finds in his girlfriend Temple’s library is especially ironic. In the library, which houses more books “than anyone could ever hope to get through in a lifetime” (277), Everett learns to read and write by studying a copy of the *Odyssey*.²⁵ However, *Greenwood* already foreshadows the fragility of such a paper consumption culture, since Temple’s library is destroyed by the Dust Storm happening as a result of the draught in the Great Depression. The library represents literature in its physical form, as made out of

²⁵ By means of this reference to the *Odyssey*, which recurs frequently throughout *Greenwood*, the novel reminds the reader Everett’s heroic ambitions.

trees, but the novel also criticizes this use of paper books. However, it also offers another possibility in the shape of a purer form of literature that connects multiple generations and helps them to understand each other. The old records of Liam Feeney—Harris’s lover and personal interpreter—reading poetry return in each generational storyline and survive through all of them. A move back to the oral culture of the classical epic is more sustainable on the long run, *Greenwood* seems to suggest. On a larger scale, this also refers to the circular form of history that the novel wants to foreground, since the beginning of literature was also in an oral tradition. Addressing our implication in deforestation might mean that we have to give up on reading paper books, the novel suggests, but that does not mean that we have to let go of the power of storytelling to connect and inspire new generations. Even, or especially, if this might mean a return to the oral culture of the earliest epics in ancient history.

Conclusion

The three characters I have discussed each come close to what a modern epic hero could look like. However, each of them deviates from this traditional role as well: Douglas and Everett are soldiers during a war, but never contribute to the actual fighting. In the case of Sapatisia, she contributes to a war against the destruction of the environment, and recruits her troops in the Breitsprecher Tree Project, but this is, of course, a different kind of war. These characters are all ambiguous, because they often have very honorable intentions: Douglas wants to convince people to stop logging trees, Sapatisia single-handedly wants to restore forests, and Everett wants to create beautiful objects out of the trees he loves so much. However, for all the critique they have on the behavior of their fellow humans, they reflect little on their own positions. To come back to a comment of one of the loggers in *The Overstory*: through their discussion of implication all three of these novels demonstrate to the reader how deforestation is not just worse elsewhere in the world. Each of these characters has heroic ambitions, and in essence also acts heroically in some situations, but each of these novels ultimately emphasizes the impossibility of being a true epic hero.

Each in their own way, the novels deliver the insight that people, with their daily individual behavior, are also implicated in the destruction of the world’s forests. To begin with, the framework is different in each of these novels, as they express a different philosophy about the main causes of deforestation. For *Greenwood*, it is the impossibility to learn from earlier generations, for *The Overstory* it is humanity’s failure to see trees as

valuable on their own, and for *Barkskins* it is the capitalist consumption pattern of the Global North. Additionally, the specific way in which the novels discuss implicated subject positions is different. Because of their intergenerational perspective, *Barkskins* and *Greenwood* each demonstrate how implication develops over time, and how people can be diachronically implicated through their descendancy. Both *Greenwood* and *The Overstory* offer a focus on the materiality of wood and the accompanying consumption culture that shows how daily behavior in a capitalist society can lead to synchronic implication in deforestation. Finally, the difficulty of seeing implication because of the separation of specific actions and their consequences, is fully integrated in the form of *The Overstory* and *Barkskins*. *Greenwood* on the other hand offers a more extensive interpretation of deforestation that directly suggests implication through the act of reading: by addressing the fact that the paper of the books we read is made from trees, the novel concretely comments on the destructive implications of the act of reading itself, which forces the reader to readily reflect on their own implication in deforestation.

Conclusion

In my introduction, I have discussed the difficulty of adequately addressing the environmental problem of deforestation, and subsequently our own roles in it. I assessed that an extension of traditional ways of understanding culpability and agency was required to see the interconnectedness of the daily lives of everyday people with such forms of ecological violence. Literature, I figured, and especially large-scale forms like the epic, would be very well equipped to represent this ‘invisible implication’ in deforestation. By dealing with questions of responsibility, accountability, and implication in deforestation, my aim in this thesis was to bring the scholarly debate in fields like Memory Studies—and subsequently Holocaust and Genocide Studies—and Perpetrator Studies, which have customarily dealt with these questions, into conversation with the field of Ecocriticism. More precisely, I wanted to redirect their common focus towards cases in which humans are in one way or another directly involved in an event of violence and are the sole victims of this violence, to an ecological case like deforestation. Reversely, I wanted to harness insights from the field of Ecocriticism to demonstrate the entanglement of important issues such as settler violence and eco-cide with genocidal and mass violence. I identified how the classical epic genre has historically focused on violence and therefore presents a point of departure for an analysis of the role of literature to make deforestation imaginable as violent. My final aim was to demonstrate how the dendro-epic represents the ecological violence of deforestation, with its different histories of implication within human communities, as a real form of violence with consequences for the entire planet.

In order to demonstrate how the representational abilities of literature can provide further insight into some of the complexities of this debate, I have turned specifically to three recently published, well-received North-American ‘dendro-epics’ that discuss the complexity of trees as a lifeform. I have investigated the function of the focus in *Barkskins*, *The Overstory*, and *Greenwood* on not only trees themselves, but also on the practice of deforestation, and found that for all of them, this focus is used to offer critique on the wrongful actions of humanity in general. Each of these novels presents trees as “grievable” (Hess, Saint-Amour) and therefore the violence against them is—either through the practice of logging or in more distanced actions, that as an effect also have the dying out of forests as a result—explicitly discussed as wrongful. Through this,

the discussion of deforestation in these novels illustrates the wrongful ways in which people are currently dealing with trees. The novels all try to affectively speak to the reader in order to demonstrate the urgent need to deal with forests and nature in general in a more responsible way, since otherwise there could be horrible consequences for mankind as a whole.

The main research question I posed in this thesis was how and to what extent *Barkskins*, *The Overstory*, and *Greenwood* present themselves as dendro-epics and, subsequently, how this presentation allows them to make human implication in violence against the environment imaginable as such, and to complicate simplistic questions about culpability in a time of ecological crisis. I conclude that the most surprising insight has been the way in which these novels foreground how implication in deforestation is in fact inescapable: there is no position outside of it. These novels might not all directly address the implication of their characters, but they do speak to the reader and uncomfortably foreground their material entanglement, precisely through the act of reading, with deforestation. Moreover, some, if not all of these novels, explicitly take up a pedagogical function and demonstrate how the combined impact of individual decisions of mostly Western people have effected the current destructive relationship between humanity and the world's forests.

In order to answer the first part of the research question, I studied the ways in which these novels—influenced by understandings about the function of literature in the Anthropocene—simultaneously look back to the genre of the classical epic, and advance it. I have argued that dendro-epics such as *Greenwood*, *Barkskins*, and *The Overstory* form a reaction to the novel and its anthropocentrism, and hark back to the epic, where humans are caught up in structures bigger than them. By taking up elements of the classical epic and incorporating them, they push the boundaries of the novel form. Thereby they hark back to a definition of the novel that is directly connected to the epic, and responds to scholars like Bakhtin and Lukács who have argued that the novel is the epic of our current time. This lens also demonstrates how the interest in large spatial scales and temporal frameworks is not something that is unique to recent ecocritical literature that attempts to respond to the demands of our new geological epoch. Instead, the classical epic already offered these to some extent.

Specifically, I have looked at the potential of the dendro-epic to scale up the narrative, both spatially and temporally. I found that all of these novels attempt to offer, like the classical epic, a 'totality' or 'arch-image' of deforestation by incorporating

perspectives from dozens of characters, some of them even non-human in the form of arboreal narrators. However, some of the novels did this more profoundly than others. *Greenwood*, while at times hinting at a non-human dimension by including for example the communal perspective, does not really integrate these viewpoints in its narrative. However, by focusing on four generations of people, who coincidentally also form a family, the novel transcends the local scale. *Barkskins* does not explicitly include a non-human perspective, but makes the combined fate of the human and non-human arboreal world more important than the fate of individual characters, thereby offering a historical arch-image of the interaction between the human and arboreal world. *The Overstory*, finally, explicitly includes non-human perspectives through evoking a non-human narrator. Combined with the perspectives of human characters, the novel offers what comes closest to a planetary arch-image. By adopting these aspects, and thereby differentiating themselves from traditional novels with a focus on the humanist subject, *Greenwood*, *Barkskins*, and *The Overstory* respond very well to claims from scholars like Ghosh about the use of realist novels.

Furthermore, in terms of literary time, the loose structure of the classical epic, with its combination of panoramic and scenic narration, when adopted by the dendro-epic leads to a different distribution of narrative time than is commonly perceived. The fictional structure of most traditional novels, where nature and the general state of the planet form a panoramic background to the individual human affairs that are discussed in specific scenes, is reversed. Most significantly in *Barkskins*, but also adopted by *The Overstory* and *Greenwood* to some extent, the panoramic part of the narrative often comments on general events such as the life and death of humans, while specific scenes often not strictly discuss human affairs, but use personal discussions between characters to address the state of the world's forests. Moreover, in their specific scenes these novels each employ accelerations and delays in the ratio between narrative time and narrated time which foreground experiences of time that are alternatives to the strictly human temporality. In this line, *Greenwood* hints at a temporal incongruity between humans and trees in a few scenes, but does not integrate this difference in the entire narrative. *The Overstory* starts off with a scene that specifically foregrounds the relative slowness of trees, and this feeling remains on the background throughout the entire novel. *Barkskins*, in contrast with the other two case studies, is not so much concerned with the slowness of trees, as it is with the speed of humanity, and foregrounds this by structurally implementing some common narratives about the beginning of the Anthropocene.

To sum up, none of these novels perfectly exhaustively all of its characteristics, but combined they offer a good overview of what the dendro-epic looks like. With its larger overview on the planet as a whole, it is well-equipped to facilitate insight into the full-size impact of deforestation. However, offering such a scale might also lead to more complexity, because this large overview runs the risk of representing humanity solely as one entity, thereby making it more difficult to see the effects of individual actions. However, *Greenwood*, *Barkskins* and *The Overstory* do in fact zoom in on specific characters, and thereby also demonstrate how individual actions are embedded in a larger planetary framework instead of being separate from it. This brings me to the second part of my two-folded research question, which is how adopting the form of a dendro-epic allows these novels to make human implication in violence against the environment imaginable as such, and to complicate simplistic questions about culpability in a time of ecological crisis.

My case studies each yield insight into ways in which the dendro-epic, or literature more generally, can make implication felt. It is precisely because the novels are so extensive that they can provide a large-scale overview, but can also zoom in on the storylines of specific characters. The reader then sees how the actions of those characters are embedded in a larger overall structure. In each of these novels, the reader continually knows more than the characters about the effects of their actions due to the large-scale (temporal) setup of the novel. In *The Overstory*, the reader learns how Douglas's tendency to be a bystander evolves into the more indirect implicated subject position. In *Barkskins*, the inclusion of the illustration of a family tree gives the reader the tools to trace Sapatisia's diachronic implication in the logging industry. Finally, in *Greenwood*, the structure of the novel means that the reader learns about the impact of Everett's actions before they see him perform these actions. As an effect, the reader gains insight in the implicated subject positions of these characters, while the characters themselves are seemingly not aware of it. Some, if not all of these novels, also demonstrate how implication is practically inescapable. Continuing on that, the reader is thus also invited to reflect on their own implicated subject positions, that they due to its inescapability also have, but of which they are probably not aware. Surprisingly, I discovered that *Greenwood*, which was the least like a dendro-epic in form and theme, was best capable of making implication feel uncomfortable and inescapable through addressing the act of reading itself. This also foregrounds the conundrum that, even

though these novels are dealing with problems that ultimately do not revolve around humans only, we still need stories about human subjects to make implication imaginable.

Needless to say, because of the size of these novels my close readings were limited, and therefore I have not been able to do full justice to the variety of insights they provide in the rich life of trees or the precise disastrous workings of settler colonialism. Instead, the genre-specific approach I have taken by focusing on their transformations of characteristics of the classical epic has brought out some important insights about their workings. For the duration of this research project, the term ‘dendro-epic’ has proven to be a very productive lens. Nevertheless, *Barkskins*, *The Overstory* and *Greenwood* have much more in common, and my study of them through the lens of the epic form is only one way of approaching them. It would be productive to now step out of the specific context of either the tree novel or the epic genre, and look at similarities with other forms of literature. To what extent, for example, is tree literature without epic dimensions and with a focus on individual matters, still able to demonstrate people’s implication in deforestation? A good example would be the affective ecopoetry, often also about trees, of poets like Juliana Spahr and Evelyn Reilly. Moreover, a comparative study of the dendro-epic with other genres is necessary and should be especially rewarding. For example, a comparison with speculative fiction about trees such as Brian Aldiss’s *Hothouse* (1962) and Ursula Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest* (1976) could form the basis for a more extensive substantiation of my argument about the value of large-scale realist literature in the Anthropocene.

On the other hand, it could be fruitful to keep the focus on anthropocenic transformations of the classical epic genre, but then not only focusing on the specific environmental violence of deforestation. I’m thinking of works like David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004) or Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* (2012). Through this focus, it would be possible to make a study of ways in which aspects of the epic can expose the major consequences of the climate crisis and respond to the demands to make literature less focused on the individual in order to address the impact of ecological violence. In this way, it also becomes possible to do much better justice to the multidirectional aspects of ecological violence like deforestation than I now have done. Finally, since the novels I have studied are all written in a North American context, this thesis could also form the groundwork for an extended comparative and transnational study into fiction about forests. For example, since a large part of contemporary deforestation is happening in the Amazon rainforest, it would be especially interesting to analyze how Latin-American

novelas de la selva, or ‘jungle novels’, such as Rómulo Gallegos’ *Canaima* (1935) and Alejo Carpentiers’ *The Lost Steps* (1953) represent the (disappearing) rainforest while also ridiculing the idea of human superiority (Wylie 52). Moreover, there are many works from non-Western contexts that are also able to provide insight in the implications of our consumer behavior. Novels, such as Mahasweta Devi’s *Chotti Munda and His Arrow* (2003), but also memoirs of indigenous activist leaders like Green Belt-movement founder Wangari Maathai, or Amazonian shaman Davi Kopenawa.

Naturally, this thesis also has some theoretical limitations. Due to spatial constraints, I was not able to carry out my analysis of the representation of the slow violence surrounding deforestation as much as I would have liked. Instead, I have taken these theoretical understandings as a starting point to further discuss the causes of deforestation. A study of the non-human dimensions of the classical epic of course could also have benefited from a posthumanist perspective. Such a focus could have been a great approach to frame the problems surrounding violence, agency and intentionality that I have discussed in this thesis. For further research it would be highly relevant to explore the focus on material ‘affordances’ of trees in these novels, especially where the practice of reading is concerned. For example, how and where do these novels reflect on the origins of their own materiality? Of course, these explorations are ultimately not limited to literature. It is easy to imagine that artworks, documentaries, or even a Christmas TV advert²⁶ are also very well capable of foregrounding the uncomfortable implicated subject position.

These are all suggestions for research that focuses on more radical artforms than the classical epic. Nevertheless, I hope that this project, through a plea for the potential of the dendro-epic, has shown how more traditional forms of literature are also capable of responding to the demands of the Anthropocene. This is especially relevant since a great deal of the debate surrounding the Anthropocene is based on the idea that, because our planet is much older than humanity itself, it is extra morally reprehensible that it is precisely people who are destroying everything. These novels discuss that theme in miniature, by focusing on trees; they are ancient, far older than humans themselves, and yet they are cut down with ease and often without a second thought. Since these

²⁶ This advert by supermarket Iceland Foods, banned for ‘political reasons’, very affectively addresses the impact of palm oil—and subsequently deforestation—on the territory of the orangutan. However, it neglects to mention other contributions to deforestation, such the usage of the white sheets of paper that are also visible in the video. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdpSpllW12o>.

discussions are all based on the comparison of ages, it is also important to consider the re-usability of the cultural products of (past) human cultures. Such a focus foregrounds how it is not necessarily required to leave these practices behind in search of speculative science fiction stories about, for instance, the demise of mankind and the rise of robots. Even—or precisely—literary forms therefore do not develop in a strictly linear way and are something to which it is possible, albeit in an adapted form, to return. This might offer some hope for those concerned about the future role of literature now that the act of reading novels evidently implicates us in deforestation practices. This leads not to the question of whether we should stop reading literature, as this thesis has shown its great value, but instead forces us to consider the material dimensions of literature.

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