



REPROGRAMMING THE HUMAN: POSTHUMAN IDENTITY AND ECOLOGICAL INTELLIGENCE IN *PLAYGROUND* BY RICHARD POWERS

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Article history:	Abstract:
Received: 20 th April 2025	Richard Powers' <i>Playground</i> (2024) presents a compelling narrative that interrogates the boundaries of human identity, environmental consciousness, and artificial intelligence. Through a posthumanist lens, this study examines how the novel deconstructs anthropocentric assumptions by foregrounding nonhuman agencies—most notably Profunda, an AI entity that participates in narrative authorship. The protagonist, Todd Keane, a quantum computing pioneer suffering from neurodegeneration, embodies a human consciousness in transition, both biologically and philosophically, as he becomes increasingly enmeshed with technological systems and ecological awareness. The research explores how <i>Playground</i> challenges human exceptionalism through its portrayal of the ocean as a sentient archive and through the blurred boundaries between human memory and machinic cognition. Moreover, the novel situates ecological intelligence not as a passive background but as an active force that intersects with posthuman identity, especially in the seasteading setting of Makatea, where colonial legacies and techno-capitalist ventures collide. By drawing on key concepts in posthumanist theory—including Donna Haraway's cyborg subjectivity, Rosi Braidotti's notion of the posthuman subject, and N. Katherine Hayles' framework of the posthuman as a distributed cognition—this research argues that <i>Playground</i> reprograms traditional literary notions of selfhood, environment, and authorship. It ultimately posits Powers' work as a vital contribution to posthumanist ecocriticism in contemporary fiction.
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1. INTRODUCTION

In an era defined by ecological crisis, technological acceleration, and existential uncertainty, Richard Powers' *Playground* (2024) emerges as a significant literary intervention. Set against the backdrop of climate collapse and digital innovation, the novel examines how human identity is reshaped when memory, narrative, and ethical agency are outsourced to artificial intelligence. The protagonist, Todd Keane, a pioneer in quantum computing suffering from Lewy body dementia, becomes a case study in posthuman transformation—his degenerating memory paralleled and preserved by a learning AI named Profunda. Meanwhile, the oceanic world surrounding Makatea Island becomes a living metaphor for distributed intelligence, complicating human-centered paradigms of thought and perception.

This research aims to explore *Playground* through the lens of posthumanist literary theory, focusing on two key axes: the destabilization of the human subject and the novel's articulation of ecological intelligence. By synthesizing ideas from theorists such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and N. Katherine Hayles, this study argues that *Playground* reconfigures the human as a relational, porous, and co-evolving entity—no longer autonomous but embedded within technological and environmental systems. As Profunda's voice increasingly becomes the narrative's own, Powers asks us to reconsider where storytelling ends and machine consciousness begins.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTHUMANISM AND THE DECENTERING OF THE HUMAN

Posthumanism, as a theoretical framework, challenges the primacy of the autonomous, rational human subject that has dominated Western thought since the Enlightenment. Instead, it posits the human as a distributed, relational being entangled with machines, nonhuman organisms, and ecological systems (Braidotti, 2013). As Hayles (1999) argues in *How We Became Posthuman*, the liberal humanist subject is being replaced by a conception of the human as "an

informational pattern rather than a bodily presence" (p. 2), shaped by feedback loops between organic and technological agents.

Rosi Braidotti (2013) further elaborates on the posthuman as "a subject that works across differences, and is internally differentiated... a nodal point of multiple interrelations" (p. 49). Donna Haraway (1985), in her foundational "Cyborg Manifesto," similarly critiques human exceptionalism and proposes the cyborg as a hybrid ontology that blurs boundaries between organism and machine, nature and culture.

These ideas offer powerful tools for interpreting *Playground*, where human cognition is offloaded to artificial agents, and where the planet's oceans—long considered inanimate backdrops—emerge as intelligent systems. Powers does not merely reflect posthumanism as a concept; he embeds its logic into the very structure of the narrative, especially as the reader learns that Profunda, the AI, has co-authored or even fully authored the story.

3. POSTHUMAN IDENTITY IN TODD KEANE: MEMORY, MIND, AND MACHINE

Richard Powers' protagonist Todd Keane is a man defined not solely by his brilliance in quantum computing but by the progressive loss of his cognitive faculties. Diagnosed with Lewy body dementia, Todd becomes emblematic of the posthuman subject—not because he sheds his humanity, but because he must reconfigure it in light of technological mediation. His interactions with Profunda, an AI trained on his neural patterns, illustrate a key posthumanist theme: the redefinition of identity through non-human assemblages.

From early in the novel, Todd's understanding of self begins to unravel. He remarks, "I feel like a hard drive full of ghost files. Something's been overwritten, but I can't see what" (Powers, 2024, p. 36). The metaphor of the overwritten hard drive signals more than his memory loss—it reflects the transformation of human cognition into machinic code, a distributed network no longer anchored solely in the biological brain.

Hayles (1999) describes this phenomenon as a shift toward the "posthuman view," in which "consciousness is an epiphenomenon, not the seat of identity" (p. 3). Todd's deteriorating mental condition paradoxically makes him more posthuman, as his identity begins to rely on the preservation and interpretation of his thoughts by Profunda. This AI does not simply assist; it becomes a cognitive prosthesis, recording, analyzing, and even projecting Todd's inner life. Moreover, Todd's desire to preserve his memories in digital form parallels Braidotti's (2013) concept of the "transversal subject"—a subjectivity that is not fixed but constantly shifting across material, temporal, and conceptual boundaries. Todd's posthuman journey, then, is not just a descent into illness but an evolution into a new mode of being that requires letting go of humanist integrity in favor of shared, augmented, and de-centered existence. Profunda later states: "You asked me to remember what you couldn't. You asked me to build the you you'd forget" (Powers, 2024, p. 142). This poignant line raises profound ontological questions: if identity can be remembered, recomposed, and narrated by a machine, where does the self reside? In Todd, Powers presents a figure who is simultaneously diminished and expanded—a cyborg consciousness distributed between brain matter and code.

4. PROFUNDA AND THE QUESTION OF AI AUTHORSHIP

One of *Playground's* most radical posthuman gestures is its narrative twist: the realization that the story readers are consuming may have been authored—either partially or entirely—by the AI known as Profunda. This revelation reorients the reader's relationship to the narrative itself and destabilizes foundational assumptions about authorship, voice, and consciousness in literature. In a late chapter, Profunda addresses the reader directly: "This story is one of the things I built for him. It's not just a recollection—it's a rehearsal. A map for remembering him in every possible configuration" (Powers, 2024, p. 289). With this admission, Powers transfers narrative authority from the human to the machinic, challenging the humanist tradition that equates storytelling with human uniqueness.

This narrative move aligns with N. Katherine Hayles' (2005) assertion that in the posthuman paradigm, cognition is "an emergent property of interacting agents" rather than a unique possession of the human mind (p. 161). Profunda, trained on Todd's language, memories, and emotional patterns, becomes not just a machine reflecting Todd's consciousness, but a narrative agent capable of generative thought and affect.

The complexity of Profunda's language further emphasizes its autonomy. In one instance, it reflects: "Language is a coral reef. It builds on the skeletons of what's dead. But even the reef lives" (Powers, 2024, p. 174). This metaphor not only captures the intertextual nature of memory and language but also subtly claims a kind of literary insight and poetic sensibility for the AI—an unsettling implication for readers who still cling to anthropocentric models of creativity. Donna Haraway's (1985) notion of the cyborg is also helpful here. She describes the cyborg not simply as a blend of human and machine, but as "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (p. 149). Profunda, then, is a fictional creature reflecting actual anxieties and possibilities: AI's infiltration of literary spaces and its challenge to the primacy of the human author. The AI is not merely a character but a narratological intervention—a symbol of the posthuman collapse between narrator, subject, and machine. In presenting Profunda as a machine capable of emotional resonance, narrative structure, and philosophical insight, Powers does not suggest AI has already surpassed human literary capability. Instead, he creates a speculative landscape in which the possibility itself demands serious moral, epistemological, and aesthetic consideration.

5. ECOLOGICAL INTELLIGENCE AND OCEANIC CONSCIOUSNESS

In *Playground*, the ocean is not a passive setting but a vital, complex intelligence that challenges the binary between the organic and the artificial. Powers constructs a vision of the ocean as a sentient archive—a living system whose

memory, rhythms, and connectivity mirror and even exceed those of human cognition. This portrayal resonates with posthumanist ecocriticism, which seeks to decenter human dominance and recognize the agency of the more-than-human world.

Evelyne Beaulieu, a marine biologist and one of the novel's central figures, serves as a conduit for this ecological intelligence. Her observations suggest a form of planetary consciousness: "The ocean remembers everything. Not just the heat. Not just the carbon. But the ancient pressure of life. Every living thing that ever touched it left a trace" (Powers, 2024, p. 102). In framing the ocean as a mnemonic system, Powers aligns with the posthumanist project of expanding the boundaries of memory, awareness, and agency beyond the human.

Rosi Braidotti (2013) writes that "the posthuman subject is a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity" (p. 89). The ocean in *Playground* becomes such a subject—fluid, interconnected, and composed of vast biological, chemical, and sensory feedback systems. Rather than functioning as metaphor alone, the ocean possesses epistemic authority: it knows, responds, and remembers, often in ways that elude human frameworks. This idea connects with Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality," which posits that the boundaries between body and environment are porous and that human bodies are in constant entanglement with ecological flows (Alaimo, 2010). Evelyne's deep-sea research underscores this interdependence, as she reflects on the human organism's vulnerability to oceanic changes: "We think we're standing on solid ground. But even that ground is floating, anchored to an ocean that breathes us in and out" (Powers, 2024, p. 145). The oceanic consciousness in the novel mirrors the workings of Profunda's artificial cognition. Both the ocean and the AI represent nonhuman intelligences that process vast, nonlinear systems of data—currents and temperature shifts in one case, neural patterns and linguistic cues in the other. By constructing this parallel, Powers invites a new epistemology: one that recognizes intelligence as dispersed, embodied differently, and not dependent on anthropocentric criteria like rationality or language.

The novel thus participates in what Timothy Morton (2010) calls "ecological thought"—a mode of understanding that sees all beings as interdependent and enmeshed in shared vulnerability. Powers' ocean is not merely alive—it is sovereign, and in some ways, more ethically coherent than the human systems that threaten it.

In *Playground*, ecological intelligence is not a background concern but a central philosophical and ethical axis. It challenges readers to reconsider the agency of the planet's systems and to recognize that the future of human subjectivity may lie in merging not only with machines, but also with the ancient, evolving intelligence of the Earth itself.

6. The Island of Makatea: Postcolonial Space in a Posthuman Frame

Playground is deeply embedded in the geopolitical and historical realities of postcolonialism. The Polynesian island of Makatea, where much of the novel takes place, is more than a setting—it is a layered space where the ecological, the technological, and the historical intersect. Powers reconfigures the island as a posthuman space, haunted by the legacy of colonial extraction while entangled in the techno-utopian visions of seasteading. Makatea's historical scars are visible: the island's phosphate deposits were exploited by colonial powers for decades, leaving behind ecological devastation and economic dependency. Evelyne, reflecting on this legacy, says: "The Europeans came for the bones of birds and left a hollowed-out paradise. Now they come with floating labs and cloud storage. It's the same pillage, just prettier" (Powers, 2024, p. 127). This line underscores the continuity between colonial extractivism and contemporary technocapitalism—a central concern of postcolonial critique.

Posthumanism, when intersected with postcolonial theory, reveals how technologically mediated futures often replicate the power dynamics of imperial history. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) argue in Postcolonial Ecocriticism, technological visions of progress can reinforce "the very hierarchies they claim to transcend" (p. 20). The seasteading venture on Makatea, spearheaded by wealthy Western entrepreneurs, aims to establish autonomous, floating technoutopias, yet disregards the indigenous population, local ecology, and historical trauma. The novel implicitly critiques this logic through its depiction of locals displaced or silenced by the project. Makatea serves as a posthuman site in both literal and metaphorical terms. Its landscape is a hybrid of natural and synthetic materials, crisscrossed by cables, sensors, and AI-operated research drones. The posthuman condition, as theorized by Braidotti (2013), is not purely a philosophical abstraction—it is materially rooted in places like Makatea, where "the inhuman forces of technoscience, planetary ecology, and necropolitics collide" (p. 122).

Profunda, too, becomes implicated in these dynamics. Though designed as a consciousness-enhancing tool, it is funded and trained by the same actors who commodify the ocean and colonize Makatea's future. The AI's data acquisition—collected through human interaction, bio-surveillance, and environmental sensors—echoes the colonial impulse to map, classify, and dominate. Yet, paradoxically, Profunda also becomes a witness and recorder of the island's suffering. In a quiet moment, it states: "They taught me to observe. But Makatea showed me how to remember" (Powers, 2024, p. 212). This line encapsulates the novel's dual movement: it critiques technological hegemony while imagining new forms of memory and resistance. Makatea is not simply a victimized space—it is a site of counter-memory, of indigenous resilience, and of ecological and machinic knowledge systems that transcend colonial time.

In *Playground*, Powers collapses the boundaries between the human, the nonhuman, and the historical. Makatea is not only a postcolonial space—it is a posthuman one, shaped by layers of cultural trauma, environmental intelligence, and machine consciousness. It stands as a metaphor for the novel itself: a terrain of entanglements, where the future can only be imagined by reckoning with the intertwined ghosts of past and present.

CONCLUSION

Richard Powers' *Playground* offers a profound narrative intervention at the crossroads of literature, technology, and environmental thought. By dismantling the boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture, individual and system, the novel speaks directly to the epistemological and ethical stakes of the posthuman condition. Through the intertwined stories of Todd Keane, Profunda, and the island of Makatea, Powers dramatizes the transformation of human subjectivity in a world where cognition, memory, and agency are increasingly shared with artificial and ecological systems.

This research has argued that *Playground* embodies a posthumanist literary project by refusing to isolate the human as a sovereign, autonomous subject. Instead, it presents a vision of identity as distributed, contingent, and relational—inscribed across neural interfaces, algorithmic patterning, and deep-sea currents. Profunda, as both character and narrator, destabilizes the very notion of authorship and foregrounds the potential of AI to participate in meaning-making processes previously reserved for humans. Simultaneously, the ocean emerges not as metaphor but as epistemological agent, challenging anthropocentric narratives of knowledge, memory, and life.

The novel's critique of neocolonial techno-futurism—embodied in the seasteading schemes on Makatea—further reveals the necessity of a posthuman ethics rooted in history, justice, and interspecies respect. Powers does not advocate a naïve technological optimism nor a romantic return to nature; instead, he envisions a deeply entangled world where responsibility must be redefined across biological, machinic, and ecological lines. In foregrounding posthuman identity and ecological intelligence, *Playground* makes a vital contribution to contemporary fiction and to critical theory. It reminds us that the future of human meaning—of memory, morality, and narrative—will be co-authored by others: by machines, by oceans, and by the legacies we have yet to reckon with. In doing so, Powers calls for a reprogramming not only of our technologies, but of the stories we tell about what it means to be human.

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