
Cirila TOPLAK*

LOVING LINDENS, LOGGING SPRUCES: ARBORISM AS AN APPARATUS OF ARBOREAL INEQUALITY**

Abstract. *The article introduces arborism as a conceptual framework for examining how economic, political and cultural practices create hierarchies among species of trees within forest systems. Like with speciesism in critical animal studies, arborism is theorised as a Foucauldian apparatus of power/knowledge that legitimises human-imposed arboreal hierarchies by making certain tree species/individual trees sacred, healing or national icons while others are left invisible or expendable. Drawing on the case of Slovenia's venerated linden and heavily logged spruce, the article shows how arborism operates through economic logic, nationalist symbolism, heritage protection, and forestry policies. Comparative examples from several other countries reveal the way such hierarchies are reproduced in diverse ecological and cultural contexts. The concept of affective arborism is used to describe the emotional economies that attach value to trees via mourning, memory and awe. Integrating Indigenous ontologies and posthuman relational ethics, the author argues for a post-arborism ethics grounded in reciprocity and multispecies justice rather than charisma or utility.*

Keywords: *arborism, forest governance, posthumanism, multispecies justice, ecological governmentality.*

INTRODUCTION: FORESTS AS GOVERNED SUBJECTS

Forest management today is shaped by the complex interplay of scientific, economic, legal and bureaucratic frameworks. These systems make forests both understandable and manageable, as well as subject to governmental oversight and rational control.

Foucault's concept of governmentality delineates the modalities by which modern states exercise power beyond the juridical and coercive domains by

* Cirila Toplak, PhD, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, cirila.toplak@fdv.uni-lj.si.

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influencing how populations conduct themselves with a mix of knowledge, norms, and institutional practices. As a rationality of governance, governmentality elucidates how life is rendered manageable, optimised, and regulated at the scale of populations (Wiede 2020, 4–5). Processes such as enclosure, colonial forestry, and the institutionalisation of modern scientific silviculture have historically led to forests being degraded from collective commons to commodified entities. Following the advent of science-based management, forests were reconceptualised as plantations, carbon reservoirs, and economic assets; trees became measurable and calculable units quantified in cubic metres or biomass. Their ecological heterogeneity was translated into hard data to facilitate utilitarian control and the epistemic imperatives of anthropocentric modernity.

In the current environmental regime, forests are primarily subjected to economic and managerial logics, reframed in the contexts of ecosystem services and development offsets. Carbon credits have turned forests into governable instruments of climate accounting, enabling corporations to ‘offset’ their emissions through preservation schemes. Conservation zones and biosphere reserves incorporate spatial and behavioural regulation, often under the guise of ecological stewardship. State interventions that purport to ‘care for’ Indigenous and forest-dependent populations – ostensibly for biodiversity protection – reinscribe authority by declaring which forms are legitimate uses and embedding these communities within rationalised regimes of care, development, and surveillance. Forest life itself is consequently becoming an object of governance administered by way of policies, markets and incentives that reproduce the logic of environmental governmentality.

Analogous to how the Foucauldian state administers the fertility, productivity and health of human populations (Foucault 2007a, 83–106), the biopolitical forest is subjected to governance through technologies of surveillance, quantification and intervention, as shown in satellite monitoring (e.g., deforestation mapping), climate modelling, and eco-rehabilitation projects. Forests are treated as living systems endowed with productivity cycles, health metrics and epidemiological vulnerabilities such as wildfires or pathogen outbreaks. Both state and corporate actors intervene in these processes by regulating biomass, managing pests and enforcing controlled fire regimes. ‘Forest wars’ (Lindenmeyer 2024) between environmentalists and extractive industries are fought in these contested spaces, reflecting deeper ideological tensions between conservationist romanticism and utilitarian capitalism. In turn, the forest is viewed as if it were a living community endowed with order yet denied the status of a subject. It is made legible and rational, as a living organism to be optimised, albeit still not a being with agency/rights.

The fact that forests are treated as living collectives but denied subjecthood shows the persistence of an anthropocentric Cartesian concept of subjectivity tied to consciousness. Posthumanist critical theory disrupts this with its focus on agency – the capacity to generate effects, sustain relations and shape worlds

– as the foundation of subjecthood. In Latour’s actor-network theory, agency is conceived to be a distributed capacity circulating across heterogeneous networks made up of both humans and co-dwellers – such as forests, rivers and technologies. Latour destabilises the modernist nature–society split: ‘nature’ itself is a cultural construct by which modernity has sought to situate humans outside the natural world and delineate who may legitimately represent it (Latour 2010, 476). Within this framework, co-dwellers function as actants that, alongside humans, co-produce the relational fabric of the Latourian Common World. In this way, agency is expanded from an exclusively human attribute to a marker of co-dweller subjectivity.

Similarly, Bennett is critical of the anthropocentric confinement of subjectivity. She instead proposes a vital materialism that recognises assemblages of matter and life as sites where agency is distributed and ethically resonant. Bennett regards agency not as a property possessed by humans and absent in co-dwellers, but as something that emerges through entanglements within human–co-dweller collectives. As she succinctly observes, “The locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman collective” (Bennett in Khan 2009, 102).

While Simard’s notion of the Wood Wide Web has attracted criticism for its anthropomorphic tendencies and potential conflation of biological and technological systems (Sheldrake 2020, 157), it nonetheless attributes a form of decentralised agency to forest ecologies. Simard describes the forest as “a web of interdependence, linked by a system of underground channels, where trees perceive, connect, and relate within a forest society” (Simard 2021, 9). Kohn introduces forest semiotics to show that forests communicate through non-linguistic signs – growth patterns, chemical signals and ecological feedbacks – which constitute semiotic webs of life (Kohn 2013, 43). Forests seen from this perspective do not merely exist within human systems of meaning; they actively produce meaning, participating in the world’s ongoing semiosis. Drawing on that framework, Westerlaken and co-authors (Westerlaken et al. 2023) examine how forests participate in environmental discourse and practice via multiple mediations: as bioindicators within ecological assessment, as algorithmic agents in environmental decision-making, and as subjects rearticulated through Amerindian cosmologies that redistribute agency and ownership in Indigenous attitudes to forests. Thus, from a posthumanist standpoint, if boundaries of subjectivity are extended beyond anthropocentric ethics and co-dweller modes of agency are acknowledged within relational ontologies, the forest – along with its arboreal and microbial actors – can be considered a material collective subject. Unlike the controlling rationalities of silviculture and objectifying epistemologies of silvology, posthumanist critical theory allows for the forest to be reconfigured as an *agentic assemblage* as opposed to a mere natural resource. Such epistemic shifts help reimagine the forest’s ontological and ethical status within cultural imaginary, and impact environmental policies, especially when in harmony with Indigenous knowledge systems and cosmologies.

By reframing forests as communicative and agentic, contemporary critical theory and Indigenous ontologies converge to disturb the boundary between metaphor and law.¹ The described convergence has begun to materialise in legal systems where forests are no longer just managed but also recognised as legal subjects. A radical example is the Te Urewera Forest in Aotearoa New Zealand, a sacred and ancestral site of the Tūhoe Māori, whose prior designation as a national park was rescinded to allow it to be given legal personhood with corresponding rights and responsibilities (Middleton 2024). Similarly, in Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia, the Amazon rainforest has been granted the status of a legal subject (Eco Jurisprudence Monitor 2018; Dejusticia 2019). While some of these initiatives proved insufficient when challenged by extractivist pressures (Muñoz 2023), in Ecuador the constitutional Rights of Nature provisions were upheld by the Constitutional Court in a landmark ruling on 1 December 2021, which effectively protected the Los Cedros cloud forest from mining operations (Los Cedros). This juridical shift signals an emerging ethical orientation that sees forests as not just as eco-economic units but as legal bearers of rights, responsibilities, and intrinsic value within both philosophical and institutional discourses.

However, if the recognition of forests as moral and legal subjects unsettles the anthropocentric monopoly over subjecthood, it does not dissolve the hidden hierarchies via which humans govern forests ideologically. Legal personhood affirms forests as unified actors in law and ethics, yet this framing leaves unexamined valuations that prioritise certain forests and forest species while rendering others expendable. In other words, alongside the formal governance of collective forest subjects by way of policies, law and rights, there persists an ideological governance – often invisible, naturalised, and culturally diverse and sedimented – which hierarchises arboreal life. It reveals another dimension of power: the cultural and political paradigm that organises not simply the humans–forests relationship, but also among tree species and particular trees from the perspective of humans.

Against this backdrop, the central question guiding this article is: how do economic, cultural, symbolic and institutional hierarchies among tree species shape forest governance, conservation practices, and relations between humans and forests? To capture this set of beliefs about arboreal inequality that projects human cultural hierarchies onto arboreal life, naturalises the differential human valuation of tree species and influences our affective, symbolic and material relations to trees, I propose the concept of arborism. In this context, the Foucauldian analytical framework is centred on governmentality via which forests become

¹ Descola (2013) demonstrated how non-Western cosmologies attribute subjectivity and agency to forests, animals and other nonhumans, in contrast with the Western naturalist tradition that objectifies them. Kauffman (2018) analysed the emergence of legislation on the rights of nature in Latin America, showing how legal personhood for ecosystems draws from both Indigenous cosmologies and global environmental law, thereby institutionalising nonhuman agency within juridical frameworks.

objects of management; power/knowledge through which particular tree species acquire differential value; and subjectification by which forests, tree species, and certain trees are constituted as governable or protected entities. Arborism is therefore theorised not merely as a cultural preference but as a power-laden assemblage of discourses, institutions, affective investments, and practices that produces arboreal inequality. While existing scholarship on environmental governmentality has primarily examined how humans govern nature, and critical animal studies have exposed the hierarchies among species using concepts such as speciesism, arborism directs attention to a distinct, yet somewhat overlooked phenomenon: the production of inequality within forests themselves, revealing how symbolic distinction becomes ecological governance.

DEFINING THE APPARATUS OF ARBORISM BY ANALOGY WITH SPECIESISM

Foucault viewed modern forms of power as increasingly articulated through biopower (Foucault 2007, 132–38), a mode of governance concerned with the regulation and optimisation of life, and operating via mechanisms he labelled *dispositifs* (apparatuses) that normalise what is “healthy”, “productive” or “sustainable” (Wiede 2020, 3). Foucault’s core focus was human societies (Winkel 2012, 81), yet post-Foucauldian theorists have expanded his theoretical framework to include other co-dwellers. Barad offered a critical appraisal of Foucault, arguing that his analysis of power is limited to the social domain and is “profoundly anthropocentric” by taking the constitution of co-dweller bodies for granted (Barad 2007, 235). Lemke’s response to Barad suggested that Foucault’s concept of the “government of things” (Foucault 2007a: 96) provided a method for moving beyond anthropocentrism since, according to Lemke, “things” were not fixed objects but were co-constituted with humans through apparatuses of government, which could be extended to include nature (Lemke 2014). Nimmo proposed a “symmetrical governmentality” that combined Foucault’s governmentality with the “generalized symmetry” of Latourian actor-network theory, whereby anthropocentrism is explicitly considered as a Foucauldian *dispositif* (apparatus) that manages the boundaries between humans and co-dwellers (Nimmo 2008, 78–80).

The Foucauldian apparatus extends beyond institutional structures to encompass historically contingent configurations of discourse, power and practice that delineate the boundaries of what can be thought, said and done. While arborism frames trees ideologically via culturally specific hierarchies of worth, it simultaneously operates as a Foucauldian apparatus; that is, a historically situated configuration of institutions, discourses and practices which materialise those beliefs. Arborism naturalises hierarchies among tree species, legitimising uneven practices of cultivation, reverence, neglect and eradication. It assembles knowledge regimes (botanical science, folklore), governance structures (forestry departments, conservation law), aesthetic ideals and ritual practices to form

a coherent logic of hierarchical valuation among tree species and trees within a given human society. The ideological dimension of arborism covers what is thought and felt, whereas the apparatus concerns how those hierarchies are enacted. Recognising their interdependence allows us to trace how cultural valuation becomes governance and how affect becomes cemented in law.

The logic of arborism mirrors the structure of speciesism: both rely on naturalised hierarchies that authorise differential treatment of living beings according to culturally constructed criteria.² Just as speciesism derives from philosophical and religious traditions that positioned animals below humans in the moral hierarchy, arborism emerges from symbolic and material practices which elevate certain tree species and individual trees while marginalising others. Arborism operates in several intertwined dimensions. Epistemically, arborism makes decisions about which trees are visible conditional on scientific, religious or nationalist systems of knowledge. It renders some trees “important” and others insignificant, in turn shaping biodiversity indices, educational materials, and ecological baselines. Materially, arborism translates into forestry practices, urban landscaping, restoration ecology, and planting schemes. State and corporate interventions disproportionately favour or exclude species based on arborism. Aesthetically, arborism governs (acquired) taste by determining which trees are seen as majestic, invasive, sacred or ignorable. Landscapes are curated according to notions of purity, nativeness and grandeur, often erasing ecologically important yet symbolically neutral species.

As Rancière (2004) might suggest, arborism constitutes a “distribution of the sensible” in the arboreal domain by regulating which trees are cut or saved, and which are seen, spoken for, or remembered. Like speciesism, arborism relies on concealment. It operates most effectively if internalised, when tree species hierarchies are seen as natural, aesthetic or pragmatic rather than ideological. In this way, arborism reproduces ecological inequality within forests, influencing the way forests are perceived and what they (may) become. Beyond a set of beliefs, arborism is thus an apparatus of power/knowledge (Foucault 2000), embedded in forestry science, conservation law, aesthetics and ritual. It produces its own “regime of truth” (discourses of nativeness, beauty, or economic worth) which normalises human-produced inequalities among trees.

A key mechanism underpinning arborism is the process of arboreal othering – the symbolic and affective exclusion of certain tree species from moral and cultural consideration. Drawing from postcolonial and critical animal studies,

² Singer (1975) introduced the concept of speciesism in moral philosophy, arguing from a utilitarian perspective that the capacity to suffer – not species membership – should ground moral consideration. Plumwood (2002) critiqued the anthropocentric logic that underpins both speciesism and ecological domination, advocating instead for a dialogical interspecies ethics. Joy (2020) theorised carnism as the apparatus that legitimises the selective human consumption of certain animal species, in turn naturalising cultural hierarchies of value. Although speciesism concerns moral hierarchies between humans and other species, while arborism concerns differential valuation among trees by humans, both concepts are subcategories of speciesism.

othering refers to the construction of hierarchical boundaries between an “us” and a devalued “other”. The common societal institute of the “national tree” is an example of symbolic inclusion: it is not just any tree, but “our” tree – a signifier of national identity, enshrined in collective memory, ritual, law, and landscape aesthetics. Its elevated status causes it to be affectively close, culturally legible, and legally protected. Other tree species, in contrast, are mostly treated as extractive resources or visual background. This mirrors the ideological structure of speciesism in which some animals (e.g., pets) are emotionally incorporated into the human sphere as individuals, yet others (e.g., farm animals, conveniently homogenised as livestock) are excluded and instrumentalised. In both cases, value is not determined by sentience or ecological function, and instead by cultural legibility and emotional projection. In this way, arborism enacts a form of “intra-forest exceptionalism” according to which symbolic proximity to humans shapes arboreal worth, reinforcing ecological inequality via affective asymmetry.

Another important aspect for understanding arborism as an apparatus is the concept of arbitrary distinction, again a term frequently invoked in discussions on speciesism and moral philosophy (Singer 2011, 188). Arborism, like speciesism, operates by naturalising culturally contingent preferences and giving legitimacy to differential treatment among tree species through symbolic, aesthetic or utilitarian registers, thereby embedding power in forest relations. The attribution of greater ecological or moral worth to certain arboreal species often reflects historical nuances in meaning (nationalist myth, sacred symbolism, colonial taxonomy) rather than any intrinsic ecological superiority. Conversely, other tree species may be reduced to roles of industrial extraction, invasive threat, or visual monotony, regardless of their ecological function or resilience. This mirrors how in the context of speciesism, for instance cows and dogs, despite their comparable emotional capacities, are consumed or domesticated depending on the cultural context. Similarly, societies may sanctify one tree species while eradicating another, even though both contribute equally to biodiversity, carbon sequestration, or habitat provisioning. The ‘self-evident’ claim that some trees possess greater inherent value due to their longevity, mythic associations or wood quality parallels the rationale in speciesism that attributes superior moral status to humans based on their cognitive capacity. However, this logic falters when placed under scrutiny: just as humans who are diverse cognition-wise (e.g., infants, the disabled) are not considered morally expendable, neither should non-symbolic or ecologically underappreciated tree species be declared disposable. In each case, moral and ecological hierarchies are shown to be contingent upon cultural narratives.

EXAMPLES OF ARBORISM

Methodologically, this article is a conceptual and theory-building intervention rather than an exercise in hypothesis testing. An interpretive discourse-analytical approach informed by Foucauldian genealogy is used to examine how

cultural narratives, institutional practices, symbolic classifications, and affective investments contribute to the production of hierarchies among tree species. The cases discussed below are illustrative more than representative and were selected for their analytical value for revealing distinct modalities of arborism. The purpose of these examples is not to provide a comprehensive survey of global arboreal cultures but to develop and refine the concept of arborism as an analytical framework. Consequently, in this section there is no systematic comparative dataset, quantitative forestry analysis, or ethnographic fieldwork. Its scope is exploratory, intended to identify recurring patterns of arboreal inequality and open up avenues for further empirical research. The Slovenian case that follows is discussed in greatest depth because it acts as the primary empirical anchor from which the broader concept is developed, and as a follow-up from a previous reflexion on forest politics in Slovenia (Toplak 2025).

In Slovenia, the linden (*Tilia platyphyllos*) epitomises the operation of arborism in the attribution of cultural, political and symbolic value to trees. As Slovenia's national tree, the linden (leaf) serves as an emblem of belonging and identity, a metonym for "our land". The independent Slovenia's currency before the euro was adopted almost ended up being called after it: *lipa*. The Najevska linden, the country's largest specimen, is entwined with myth: legends say that King Matjaž (Slovenia's political Messiah) is sleeping beneath it. Political leaders gather beneath the Najevska canopy once a year to deliberate on current affairs, perpetuating the linden's role as a site of civic ritual.

The veneration of lindens in Slovenia dates back to Ancient Slavic traditions, with carvings and sculptures of their divinities being made of linden timber, and is preserved in the Slovenian phrase translated as "standing as still as a linden god". In the medieval period, lindens served as *village trees* – social and juridical centres at which local assemblies (called *dvanajstija*³) were convened, disputes adjudicated, and at times sentences enforced (Sattler and Stele 1973, 43). Lindens were typically planted as memorial trees to mark significant events, such as the "Turkish lindens" which commemorated battlefield victories over the Ottoman aggressors. During Italy's occupation of western Slovenia between 1920 and 1943, the act of planting lindens was seen as an expression of anti-Fascist resistance, while the 19th century song "The Linden Tree Grew Green" became an unofficial Slovenian anthem.⁴ Lindens thus hold a central place in Slovenian mythology, folklore as well as vernacular medicine for the healing properties of linden tea. A "symbol of Slovenianness" (Jerše 2025, 60), the linden does not require ecological protection: its endurance is secured by its symbolic capital. To

³ In the feudal era, the *dvanajstija* (Slov. for twelve) was composed of 12 well-reputed villagers who represented local authority with limited powers.

⁴ On 12 December 1941, the Academic Choir of the University of Ljubljana held the last public concert in the occupied capital of Ljubljana before the Resistance imposed a "cultural silence" to prevent assimilation policies by the Italian authorities. The last song performed at the concert was "The Linden Tree Grew Green" (Svenšek 2021).

cut a linden down, as another saying goes, is to forfeit one's Slovenian identity.

Four subgenera of *Tilia* grow in Slovenia, yet it is *Tilia platyphyllos* that has been made exceptionally important. Originally a forest tree species, today it is rarely found in forests near to its very similar, yet comparatively insignificant close relatives. As a direct outcome of selectivity based on arborism, forest trees constitute only 13.5% of all officially protected dendrological specimens in Slovenia. Over half of all currently registered dendrological heritage is lindens (Jenčič 2004, 268–70). Such prevalence reflects the trees' cultural valorisation since their deliberate propagation in cultural landscapes, protection, and veneration have assured their survival to a heritage status. In comparison, ubiquitous spruces (*Picea*) have been heavily logged and seldom permitted to achieve monumentality unless naturally shielded by remoteness, or commemorated for their symbolic role in Slovenian resistance during the Second World War like with the protected spruce forest at the Osankarica memorial. Spruce, at one time the most common tree species in Slovenian ethnic territory and intensively planted and logged for its soft and malleable wood since the latter half of the 19th century, is now second to beech, yet still represents about one-third of all forest trees in Slovenia. Up to one-half of the total annual felling in this forested country is so-called "sanitary" logging. Due to damage caused by severe storms and bark beetle, it affects spruce disproportionately, up to 95% of them (Poljanec 2025). Even though these climate change effects might cause spruce to become rare in Slovenian forests in a few decades, commercial logging continues. Spruce wood remains relatively cheap and actively promoted, even by public institutions and public media, for its variety of uses in construction (SPIRIT 2025).

From a Foucauldian perspective, the Slovenian case demonstrates how arborism functions as a power/knowledge regime. Cultural narratives, heritage institutions, forestry practices and political rituals collectively (re)produce the linden as a privileged arboreal subject while continuing to treat spruce primarily as an object of economic management. Whereas the linden is protected by its symbolic capital, spruce still depends on economic calculations and continues to be valued chiefly for what can be extracted from it rather than for what this tree species signifies as a defining feature of the Slovenian forest landscape and thus a key provider of arboreal ecological benefits. Although spruce is a native species deeply woven into everyday practices and the collective imaginary, including its dominant use as a Christmas tree under the misnomer "Christmas fir", it is not constituted as a tree of collective memory, national belonging, or symbolic heritage. Consequently, even in circumstances of climatic vulnerability and ecological decline, spruce continues to be mostly governed according to the rationalities of extraction and forest management. Only its most exceptional specimens – those distinguished for their extraordinary age, size or height – tend to receive institutional protection and public attention. This reflects arborism's logic of exceptionalism, whereby individual trees are detached from the wider forest assemblage and curated as rare natural monuments, much like

objects displayed in an open-air museum. The case of Slovenia's largest known spruce, the Queen of Bohinj, is illustrative. Estimated to be around 250 years old and growing in an exceptionally remote location, it has been proclaimed a national natural asset. Nonetheless, its precise whereabouts have deliberately not been disclosed since reaching it would lead visitors to face significant risks in difficult mountain terrain (Gozd in gozdarstvo 2021). The paradox is telling: the tree acquires institutional recognition because it is exceptional, yet this recognition cannot be translated into public visibility. In Foucauldian terms, the Queen of Bohinj holds a peculiar position between visibility and invisibility, officially celebrated while remaining physically inaccessible, yet the countless 'ordinary' spruces that make up the forest continue to be viewed and governed primarily as a timber resource. Ironically, the ultimate form of arborist exceptionalism may thus be the transformation of a tree into pure representation, a spectacle. The Queen of Bohinj is admired, celebrated and circulated digitally without ever being encountered. The arboreal subject is preserved as an image while the forest sustaining it remains largely invisible.

Beyond Slovenia, in the United Kingdom the English oak (*Quercus robur*) is elevated in both symbolic and conservationist registers, widely considered the national emblem and frequently featuring in heritage and rewilding campaigns. Its longevity and strength have made it a symbol of the British monarchy and maritime supremacy. Meanwhile, co-occurring species like birch (*Betula*) or ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) receive considerably less legal and cultural attention, notwithstanding their ecological importance. Oak is also the national tree of Germany. Already sacred to Germanic tribes, its stability and longevity inspired German romanticists to identify it as the representation of German national spirit and strength (Farmer 2022, 112). Oak leaves appear on military medals and insignia as well as on German euro coinage. A similar symbolic status was held by oak in Russian history and traditions where it represented "the tree of life" (Pinkham 2026).

With the *Quercus* genus containing hundreds of species native to the Northern Hemisphere and several countries in Europe and North America designating oak as their national tree, oak exemplifies how arborism can extend beyond national contexts. This recurring symbolic elevation is seen in both shared cultural genealogies and ecological realities: oak has long occupied a prominent place in the landscapes, economies and mythologies of societies where it naturally occurs. Yet precisely because these associations appear self-evident, they reveal how arborism operates most effectively when historical and cultural valuations become naturalised. The repeated elevation of oak across different societies demonstrates how particular ecological and historical conditions can become sedimented in a regime of truth according to which certain tree species come to embody strength, continuity and belonging. Arborism institutionalises and naturalises such associations, transforming ecological familiarity into symbolic privilege.

In Canada, the sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*) is a national arboreal symbol.

Its image adorns the Canadian flag, currency, and municipal coats of arms, whereas federal initiatives such as the Canada 150 Maple Tree planting campaign (MLF News 2017) reinforce its symbolic dominance. Simultaneously, its cultural significance within Indigenous cosmologies renders it a spiritual and ritual keystone (GRASAC 2015). Such multi-layered reverence ensures the maple's institutional visibility and legal protection, reinforcing the position it enjoys in Canada's arboreal hierarchy. In contrast, the Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*), a widely planted non-native species, is an example of the aesthetic and ecological tensions within frameworks of arborism. Favoured by municipal planners for its robustness and shade qualities, it is increasingly labelled "invasive", notably for displacing native sugar maples in ecosystems like Mount Royal in Montreal (Hui 2013). Arborism operates here by way of aesthetic and ecological preference: symbolic nativeness becomes a criterion for value, while functionally viable yet non-native species are pathologised.

Eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*) has also been singled out in Canada via arborism. Designated by the Haudenosaunee as the "Great Tree of Peace" (Haudenosaunee Confederacy), the species retains symbolic weight in both Indigenous and settler historical contexts by appearing in provincial iconography and local rituals. Nonetheless, it has also been extensively logged for its timber. This contradiction highlights how arborism can accommodate both sacralisation and commodification within a single species, contingent upon institutional and economic contexts, particularly those reproduced by colonialism. Similarly, Māori sacred kauri (*Agathis australis*) forests in Aotearoa New Zealand were reduced to colonial monoculture economic units and unscrupulously felled (Farmer 2022, 136–43), with the participation of the impoverished Māori.

In Japan, sakura (cherry blossoms) are culturally overrepresented as symbols of transience and national identity and ritualised through hanami festivals and shrines dedicated to individual cherry (*Prunus serrulata*) trees (Primack and Higuchi 2007). These trees are often maintained in urban environments for aesthetic and national purposes at the same time as less-celebrated native species, such as Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) or Japanese cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*), receive far less protection or cultural visibility. In India, the peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) and banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*) trees enjoy sacred status across Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions. Their association with divine presence, healing, and community has led to their ritual protection and shielding from 'development'. Other ecologically significant, albeit symbolically neutral species, like teak (*Tectona grandis*), attract no such reverence, only intensive planting and logging for their economically prized timber. "By nationalizing the bodhi tree and its origin story – to the point of adding sacred leaves to the flag – the leadership of postcolonial Sri Lanka further marginalized minority Hindu Tamils and Tamil-speaking Muslims", Farmer shows how arborism intersects with another apparatus: cultural racism (Farmer 2022, 60). The most straightforward symbols of 'arbonationalism', as Farmer calls it, are national flags representing

tree species, e.g., of Canada, Lebanon, Peru, Sri Lanka, Haiti, and San Marino (Farmer 2022, 134).

These few examples illustrate the structural logic of arborism: cultural symbolism, economic policies and cultural heritage mediate ecological worth. Arborism extends beyond forestry into religious, aesthetic and nationalist frameworks by normalising selective preservation and obscuring those tree species which do not conform to the dominant semiotic orders.

MODALITIES OF ARBORISM

In premodern traditions in the area presently known as Slovenia, the Nature Worshipers of the Primorska region believed that “every individual had their oak growing, and they feared cutting down oaks. It could have happened that they would cut down their own oak and consequently die on the spot” (Medvešček 2015, 188). At the same time as the Nature Worshipers attributed special status to certain tree species and individual trees, they also venerated forests as their havens and trees generally as their co-dwellers. The criteria they used to single out particular trees were far from the modern obsession with quantification and excesses. The trees the Nature Worshipers regarded as sacred were also those that thrived even in the harshest conditions, akin to their secret subculture that despite persecution had survived for centuries amidst Christians (Toplak 2023, 120, 211). Unlike modern arborism, which singles out exceptional trees as objects of heritage, tourism or extraction, the Nature Worshipers’ valuation of particular trees was part of a broader cosmology of reciprocal dependence. Here, arborism functioned less as a technology of exclusion than as a means of articulating relationships between humans, trees and forests, demonstrating that the privileging of certain trees does not necessarily entail the devaluation of others.

Among Indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest, the Western redcedar (*Thuja plicata*) was a keystone species, valued for its durability and versatility. Modern capitalist forestry in the region has elevated this tree species above others for the same reasons. Yet, the ethical orientation of Indigenous arborism diverged sharply from such forestry. First, traditional Indigenous use of trees was holistic: the whole of a felled redcedar was used, from bark and sap to trunk and firewood, leaving little waste. In contrast, modern industrial logging often discards up to one-third of harvested timber as residue as if trees are an inexhaustible resource. Second, Indigenous arborism was ecologically mindful, oriented to sustaining intergenerational continuity, whereas capitalist hyper-rational arborism is driven by short-term profit logic with long-term ecological consequences hardly arising as an issue, showing the irrationality involved. This comparison reveals that even though both Indigenous and modern capitalist societies construct hierarchies among trees, the former situates commodification within an ethic of reciprocity and ecological balance, while the latter enacts it by way of abstraction, waste, and systemic erasure. Traditional Indigenous arborism mostly combines selective reverence and use to form a relational

ethic that sustains forest integrity. In contrast, mechanistic extractivist arborism transforms tree hierarchies into instruments of large-scale ecological destruction, severing cultural value from ecological care. Although modern forestry regimes often declare patches of old growth forest or endangered species as protected, such measures are frequently simply compensatory gestures that obscure, rather than resolve, the pressures of systemic logging. Arboreal inequality is thus not inherent to the mere act of (de)privileging certain species and instead arises from the way such hierarchies are institutionalised, communicated and enacted. The cases presented above point to competing governmentalities of the forest: one primarily oriented to reciprocity and relational obligation, the other to extraction and optimisation.

The destruction of the Sycamore Gap tree (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) in the United Kingdom in 2023 was seen as an act of impulsive vandalism and led to widespread public mourning, the culprits going to prison, and international media coverage (Brown 2025). Rather than its ecological function, the tree's symbolic role as a cultural landmark mobilised civic outrage and thus exemplified affective arborism, where value is tied to emotional capital. A comparable, yet more unsettling case had unfolded 16 years earlier in Canada when a unique mutant spruce with "golden" yellow needles was destroyed on purpose (Vaillant 2005). Venerated by the Indigenous Haida community and commodified as a key tourist attraction on the archipelago of Haida Gwaii, the Golden Spruce was cut down in 1997 by Grant Hadwin, a logger. He claimed his act was to protest the hypocrisy of treating a single tree with reverence while billions of others were being destroyed in industrial clear-cutting. Hadwin's ethically indefensible gesture lays bare the ideological selectivity of arborism: notwithstanding the intense emotions concentrated on one extraordinary tree, the nearby systemic deforestation continued at a horrifying scale with little resistance. Hadwin attempted to expose and oppose the folly of arborism using the most destructive expression of arborism.

These two cases show how arborism organises collective affect – mobilising protection for emblematic tree specimens while keeping 'ordinary' forests invisible – and how acts of violence against such symbols can both draw attention to and exploit those ideological fault lines. Arborism namely operates through forestry policies, symbolic registers and legal frameworks, as well as affect, as an internalised mode of governance that channels individuals' emotions concerning certain trees parallel to naturalising the invisibility of the many others that constitute the living forest collective. Attachment, grief, awe and memory have become technologies via which arboreal hierarchies are reproduced or contested.

Another dimension of affective arborism is the 'smaller-self effect' that ancient giant trees, among other spectacular natural stimuli, can produce in humans. Research in environmental psychology suggests that the sense of awe while standing before immense natural beings induces a felt diminishment of individual egos accompanied by heightened connectedness, humility, and

prosocial orientation (Piff 2015). People often seek out these arboreal giants – most often sequoias (*Sequoia sempervirens*), redcedars, or Douglas firs (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) – for their grounding, healing and restorative effects. Just like certain animal species, such as cats, horses or dolphins, can have a therapeutic effect on humans, ancient giants are perceived to be arboreal therapists by susceptible individuals.

Still, there is also a pragmatic reason why ancient trees most capable of producing ‘the smaller-self effect’ have escaped the chainsaw. With extreme age, their trunks often become hollow, their wood brittle or less valuable for industrial purposes, and hence unattractive to timber markets. In other cases, such as the mentioned Queen of Bohinj, their survival is due to inaccessibility: trees in inaccessible or economically marginal terrain have been spared because the costs of extraction exceed their commercial value. In a forest in Slovenia that I happen to own, for example, spruces of extraordinary dimensions have been allowed to grow to reach monumental size on extremely steep terrain in otherwise favourable conditions since removing them is logistically prohibitive. This very absence of human intervention can itself be considered as a subtle form of governance: governance by omission. In some places, forest giants have been allowed to live not because they were valued but since they were not seen as worth the effort to cut down and transport. Such trees lie both outside explicit effects of arborism and inside its logic of selective visibility.

These survivors constitute what might be called contingent sanctuaries, referring to places where trees are spared not through reverence or legal protection but because they fall outside the circuits of arborism. They remain ungoverned by recognition, persisting more by neglect and ignorance than codified protection. Such spaces often produce the strongest affective reactions: accessed only by making “pilgrimages” to remote areas or chanced upon, these extraordinary trees persist as embodiments of deep time, reminding humans of their own ephemerality. When contrasted with intentional sanctuaries like sacred groves or protected primeval forest areas, contingent sanctuaries reveal the complex interplay of economic disinterest, inaccessibility, and affective revaluation in shaping which trees endure and perish.

TOWARD POST-ARBORISM ETHICS

The fact that economic disinterest or inaccessibility are reasons for the survival of arboreal giants is hardly reassuring. If their endurance depends on contingency rather than principle, their continued existence is precarious. With the high-quality timber of certain tree species becoming increasingly scarce and the assistance of constantly improving technologies, even highly restricted sites are being logged or clear-felled for monoculture plantation forests. Post-arborism ethics would demand that such sanctuaries no longer be accidental but intentional; instead of persisting at the margins of the apparatus, trees should be acknowledged as co-authors of ecological histories. To move beyond arborism

in this case is hence to replace governance by omission with governance by reciprocity, so as to make sure that old growth forests survive not by falling through the cracks of extractive rationality, but by being actively respected as relational lifeworlds.

If arborism is a subtle and sophisticated Foucauldian apparatus of ecological inequality, resisting it requires more than biodiversity metrics or preservation efforts. It necessitates a shift toward a post-arborism ethics grounded in ecological interdependence and multispecies justice. Such an ethics recognises forests as relational assemblages in which value is distributed across visible and invisible lines of connection. Haraway's notion of plant companions expands this reconfiguration of ethics from stewardship to co-dwelling. Rather than viewing trees as resources or symbols, Haraway calls for "making kin" with vegetal others, namely, learning to live within the response-ability of shared ecological entanglements (Haraway 2016, 16). In this light, a post-arborism ethics might not seek to abolish hierarchy abstractly but to cultivate companionship as a situated practice of care, reciprocity, and shared life within forest assemblages.

The post-arborism ethics calls for an epistemic humility by refusing to impose hierarchies rooted in colonial science, aesthetic preference or economic rationality. Instead, it demands participatory and reparative models of forestry that attend to invisible species, marginal ecologies, and non-iconic trees. A post-arborism approach might centre on plural forest knowledges, multispecies governance and context-based care, refusing both the sanctification and instrumentalisation of trees.

One reason arborism remains so tenacious is the absence of a generally accepted moral framework for recognising our kinship with trees. In animal ethics, sentience has served as a foundational criterion for moral standing, allowing philosophers such as Singer (1975) to argue against animal exploitation. Trees, in contrast, have been assumed to lack sentience and accordingly remain excluded from serious moral concern. However, research in forest communication (Simard 2021), plant responsiveness (Gagliano 2014) and fungal symbiosis (Sheldrake 2020) reveals that trees exhibit memory, signal transduction, and even forms of preference and learning. Although these might not amount to sentience in the animal sense, they invite a reconceptualisation of moral considerations rooted in relational intelligence and ecological embeddedness. If forests are complex societies, our ethical frameworks must move beyond anthropocentric criteria, and account for interdependence and co-constitution. Recent developments in posthumanist theory and ecological humanities suggest that respect and memory may serve as foundational registers for opposing arborism. As Rix (2025) argues, human evolution itself has been profoundly shaped by trees and their ecological strategies. Our bipedal posture, cognitive development, and even early tool use arose in arboreal environments that both sheltered and constrained us. In this perspective, trees are not passive backdrops to human history but evolutionary co-authors, shaping who we are long before we started

to think about shaping them. That awareness has been systematically obscured by humans' technological superiority and economic greed, reducing forests to resources instead of acknowledging them as vital formative partners. A post-arborism ethics must therefore begin with the recovery of deep memory: trees are living historical monuments and architects of our biological becoming. To forget this is to perpetuate the arrogance underpinning arborism; to remember it is to ground new relations of respect, reciprocity and humility with the resilient genius of trees.

In designing post-arborism ethics, it is important to consider that theoretical and philosophical attempts – whether Latourian actor–network theory, Braidotti's posthuman subjectivity or (post)Foucauldian subjectification – tend to abstract the subjectivity of the forest as a conceptual assemblage that transcends individual species or specimens. By contrast, legal subjectification (like with the Amazon or *Te Urewera*) and moral subjectification (as with reverence for certain forests, tree species or individual trees) inevitably take place in relation to particular forests and trees. Yet whenever concreteness is invoked, arborism re-enters: while some trees or forests are elevated as subjects, others remain expendable or invisible. The issue is not recognition itself, but selective recognition detached from responsibility for the whole. In this sense, the subjectification of forests often reproduces the very hierarchies it seeks to undo, embedding them within power apparatuses that govern how arboreal life is valued. In practice, we cannot abolish concreteness in law or management. Instead, a post-arborism ethics compels us to bind every concrete act to assemblage-level safeguards, completing species charisma with structural complexity, networked function, and equitable attention with regard to the forest's less visible lives.

A post-arborism ethics would denaturalise species hierarchies rooted in nationalism, utility, or aesthetics. It would view trees as collaborators in multispecies world-making, and as collective subjects of justice. Conservation, restoration and forestry would then have to be rethought for biodiversity and arboreal dignity. Like animal speciesism, arborism is not “natural, necessary, or neutral” (Joy 2020, 100–106). It is an apparatus that can be made visible. The plethora of propitious discourses on such exposure ranges from critical theory to popular culture (e.g., Powers 2018; Macfarlane 2025).

Affective arborism can be both the problem – as in selective sentimentalisation – and the solution: a cultural and ethical realignment wherein the forest is embraced as a co-subject in shared planetary futures. While humans are drawn to particular trees for cultural, spiritual or affective reasons, such attachments should not be allowed to obscure the neglect or exploitation of others. Hierarchies of attention may be inevitable – just as in human societies some individuals or figures command greater symbolic weight – but their ethical implications should be reoriented. The objective is to translate exceptional affection into a generalised ethics of care (Whyte and Cuomo 2016). The awe inspired by arboreal therapists, the reverence for national trees, or grief for lost tree icons can be extended

outward, reattuned to the forest as an assemblage. Affective arborism operates as an apparatus of (in)visibility and attention, yet one that can be strategically subverted: the same affect that once reinforced hierarchies can be rechannelled toward whole forests, transforming an apparatus of exclusion into a practice of care. When reconfigured through education, ritual and governance, awe, grief and reverence for certain trees could act as gateways to a more egalitarian and ecologically mindful mode of relationality. The ethical shift envisioned here also implies a political reorientation. Bruno Latour urges a move from the abstract “global” and extractive “local” toward the “terrestrial” as a collective mode of dwelling in and with the Earth (Latour in Riquier 2018). The terrestrial, for Latour, gathers beings around the soil they depend on; likewise, post-arborism gathers human and arboreal actors around shared conditions of survivability, replacing domination with attachment, and control with co-habitation.

Achieving this shift requires both cultural transformation and institutional leadership. Education and public discourse can reframe how trees are narrated so that iconic specimens are always situated within their broader ecological webs. Extraordinary trees should never be celebrated in isolation but presented as dependent upon and continuous with the less visible species around them. Similarly, ritual and cultural practices can work to expand affection for the singular to care for the collective, for instance, pairing the commemoration of revered maples, oaks or lindens with the planting and protection of their uncelebrated companions.

In efforts to extend affect and attention across species lines, multispecies storytelling offers an ethical and methodological bridge. Van Dooren (2014) and Kirksey (2014) propose that telling stories with rather than about co-dwellers fosters practices of attentiveness and narrative justice that make space for other lives to be registered within cultural imagination and moral community. Incorporating this approach, post-arborism ethics might see forests being re-narrated as networks of storied lives, each with their particular trajectories, losses and agencies.

Most importantly, nature protection authorities should lead the way by abandoning hierarchical frameworks that rank trees by size, age, or other criteria of extraordinariness. Even though registers of the “largest”, “tallest” or “oldest” specimens might attract attention, they entrench arborism logics of exceptionality and eclipse the ecological importance of forests as relational wholes. Authorities should instead educate publics about the importance of entire forest assemblages and reinforce respect not simply for exceptions but for the living complexity that sustains life on the planet.

CONCLUSION

The known proverb “You cannot see the forest for the trees” gives a hint at how arborism permeates our mentalities. Its common meaning – that one may become so preoccupied with details that the whole escapes them – implicitly positions trees as obstacles to perceiving the ‘true’ object: the forest. This

linguistic hierarchy naturalises arborism by stressing the individuality of trees at the expense of the abstract collective, the homogenised resource, the amorphous stockpile of biomass, as a sort of ‘fact’ or vernacular wisdom. This is actually a Foucauldian micro-discourse: a seemingly innocuous cultural utterance that reproduces larger ideological orders by emphasising certain relations while obscuring others. The proverb performs the very work of arborism by naturalising hierarchies of perception and denying the possibility of seeing forests and trees in a co-constitutive tension. Still, it encodes arborism by warning against excessive attention to trees and being simultaneously critical of this very fixation, identifying it as a cognitive error. In this respect, the proverb reflects a broader epistemological tension. Modern science is built on particularisation, dissecting wholes into measurable parts, whereas Indigenous ontologies have long emphasised the integrity of relational systems. Through complex systems theories, only recently has Western science started to reckon what Indigenous knowledge has never forgotten: that synergistic wholes matter as much as or more than their parts.

This article offers a conceptualisation of arborism as a set of discursive and institutional practices. Arborism, as theorised here, refers to a structure of ecological inequality that operates within forests and shapes their composition. As an apparatus, arborism fuses knowledge, policy, aesthetics and ritual to form a coherent albeit unacknowledged hierarchy of arboreal value. To expose arborism is to denaturalise the forest’s internal order imposed by humans, and to envision more egalitarian, relational and ethical futures of human–forest coexistence. As climate change and ecological collapse accelerate, challenging such ideological frameworks is becoming urgent. The forest can survive without humans, yet humans cannot survive without the forest (Perko 2011), but what kind of forest survives will also depend on how we undo the grip held by arborism on our societies.

Akin to Bourdieu’s doxa (Bourdieu 2008, 119–30), arborism survives because it is deeply ingrained, unquestioned and taken for granted as ‘common sense’. While the aspiration to overcome arborism might suggest the possibility of a perfectly egalitarian ethics of trees, such an ideal is complicated by the structural tendency of human cultures to translate difference into hierarchy. Even though, in itself, diversity does not necessitate inequality, historically, cultural frameworks – from class and race to species and tree preference – have repeatedly converted variation into stratification. True egalitarianism, whether among humans or across species, may remain asymptotic more than achievable. My own encounter with ancient redcedars in the Pacific Northwest crystallised this tension. Standing among those giants, I experienced a radical ‘smaller-self effect’ which reordered the scale of my perceived significance. Following that intense experience, the forest at home no longer appears the same: affection for it is now tinged by the comparison. Arborism is not just an ideology out there in culture and governance; it is also inside each of us, influencing our attachments and hierarchies of value. Post-arborism ethics cannot promise the hierarchy will

be eradicated, yet can insist on its denaturalisation by exposing the arbitrariness of symbolic, aesthetic or economic criteria that privilege certain tree species while making others expendable. That entails cultivating vigilance and humility, with hierarchies being acknowledged as contingent and contestable rather than natural. An untapped awareness-raising opportunity in this regard could be our consumer habits and choices, largely uninformed about the variety of uses of wood products in everyday life, from the ubiquitous construction materials, paper, furniture and firewood to less obvious textiles, cellophane, sponges, adhesives, chewing gum, rubber, cork, cosmetics and dyes, which may be attractively labelled “organic”. Reduced reliance on wood products would relieve forests and loosen the ideological hold of arborism, which thrives on the normality of everyday consumption. By making the cultural hierarchies embedded in uses of wood visible and debatable, post-arborism ethics can open a space where forests are viewed for what they are: our co-dwellers in shared ecological worlds.

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STATEMENT ON THE USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS ARTICLE

While preparing this article, I, Cirila Toplak, made use of the AI Scholar tool (OpenAI) between August 2025 and June 2026 to linguistically refine the manuscript and organise the reference list. After using this tool, I carefully reviewed and edited all the generated content and assume full responsibility for the content and conclusions presented in the article.

DATA AVAILABILITY

No new research data were generated.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

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LJUBIMO LIPE, SEKAMO SMREKE: ARBORIZEM KOT DISPOZITIV DREVESNE NEENAKOSTI

Povzetek. Članek uvaža arborizem kot konceptualni okvir za preučevanje, kako ekonomske, politične in kulturne prakse ustvarjajo hierarhije med drevesnimi vrstami znotraj gozdnih sistemov. Arborizem, podobno kot specizem v kritičnih študijah živali, je teoretiziran kot foucaultovski dispozitiv oblasti in vednosti, ki upravičuje človeško vzpostavljene hierarhije med drevesnimi vrstami: nekatere drevesne vrste in posamezna drevesa povzdiguje v svete, zdravilne ali nacionalne ikone, druga drevesa pa dela nevidna ali nepotrebna. Članek na primeru čaščene lipe in ekonomsko izkoriščane smreke v Sloveniji analizira, kako arborizem deluje skozi ekonomsko logiko, nacionalistično simboliko, varstvo dediščine in gozdarske politike. Primerjalni primeri iz več drugih držav razkrivajo, kako se drevesne hierarhije reproducirajo v različnih ekoloških in kulturnih kontekstih. Koncept afektivnega arborizma opisuje čustvene razsežnosti, zaradi katerih ljudje vrednotijo drevesa skozi prizmo žalovanja, spominjanja in strahospoštovanja. Na osnovi staroselskih ontologij in posthumanističnega pojmovanja odnosnosti se avtorica v sklepu zavzame za postarboristično etiko, ki bo temeljila na recipročnosti in medvrstni pravičnosti, ne pa na karizmi ali koristnosti dreves.

Ključni pojmi: arborizem, gozdarstvo, posthumanizem, medvrstna pravičnost, ekološka vladnost.