# BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM: WAR, ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION AND ECOLOGICAL EMPATHY IN RICHARD POWERS' NOVELS

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**Abstract**

The article argues that the novels of Richard Powers, particularly *The Overstory, The Echo Maker,* and *Bewilderment*, diagnose the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene as a form of undeclared, ecocidal war waged by an anthropocentric culture against the non-human world. Lack of empathy, Powers' novels suggest, is the root of all ecological devastation. Eco-insensitivity breeds eco-apathy, and this is a treatable illness when ecological awareness and empathy are cultivated. Empathy, at the levels of knowing, feeling, and acting prompts humans to take on moral responsibility for their actions to oppose systems that perpetuate ecocide. Eventually, Powers' fiction turns to the power of eco-narrative to challenge readers to revisit the foundational human story, shifting from a narrative of conquest to one of citizenship within the broader community of species.

**Keywords:** Anthropocentrism, cybernetics, ecocide, ecocriticism, empathy.

## Introduction

The disturbing impact on the environment due to human activity often defines the Anthropocene era. Many metaphors have been used to describe the era, both critically and in a naïve manner. A more accurate metaphor employed by Richard Powers, a contemporary American Novelist, in his works to describe the present epoch is that of war. The Anthropocene is in a perpetual state of undeclared, asymmetrical conflict waged by a human-centric culture against the non-human world. The ecological consequences of this conflict—widespread habitat destruction, mass biodiversity loss, and systemic pollution—are functionally

indistinguishable from the environmental devastation wrought by military warfare. In this context, literature, especially the burgeoning genre of climate fiction or "cli-fi," serves as a vital medium for bearing witness, fostering a sense of recognition and accountability for a crisis that scientific data alone has failed to make sufficiently tangible.

The primary weapon in this war is ecocide. Rachel Killean from Queen's University Belfast, in his article titled "Why It's Time to Make Ecocide a Crime", defines it as ". . . unlawful or wanton acts committed with the knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment." Ecocide provides a legal and moral framework for understanding mass environmental destruction. Felix Bohr, a German historian and journalist, in his "A Revolution of Killing: The Technological Innovations of WWI", outlines the evolution of weapons of mass destruction and their link to ecological destruction. The deliberate use of chemical defoliants like 'Agent Orange' in the Vietnam War, and the systematic clear-cutting of ancient forests for profit, are framed as both collateral damage and intentional acts of annihilation. When viewed from the lens of ecocide, the modern hypocrisy of global ethics is laid bare.

**Ecocide and the Logic of Exploitation**

The philosophical underpinning of the war on nature lies in anthropocentrism, which holds humanity as the sole bearer of intrinsic value and thereby reduces the non-human world to a resource to be exploited for human greed. This perspective, as critiqued by frameworks like Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" and Arne Naess's "Deep Ecology", not only denies the inherent worth of ecosystems but also provides the moral license for their exploitation (209-28). It is in this context that Powers' novels dramatise this logic of exploitation by portraying industrial practices not as neutral economic activities but as calculated acts of ecocide.

In *The Overstory*, the clear-cutting of old-growth forests is rendered as a literal battlefield. The novel states that the destruction of "ninety-seven per cent of the old ones" is not merely a number but an ecocide (152). The destruction of an ecosystem for profit can well be compared to the devastation caused by war. The reader confronts the reality that the legal and economic systems, more often than not, are complicit in an act of ecocide. A similar ecocidal logic is at work in *The Echo Maker*. The narrative is set against the backdrop of the Platte River in Nebraska, a crucial stopover for the annual migration of half a million sandhill cranes. The environmental conflict involves a project to boost tourism by investing in commercial facilities and amusement parks along the river, which upsets the habitat of migrating sandhill cranes. The plan exemplifies the anthropocentric

worldview, which is incapable of valuing non-human phenomena that exist outside its own economic and recreational interests (368-79).

The destruction of forests, in *The Overstory,* for instance, is related to the loss of biodiversity and ecological stability, which in turn fuels the radicalisation of the activists; the system's violence begets violence in turn. In *Bewilderment*, nature strikes back with floods, fires, plagues, and disasters of every kind (87). These are not random occurrences but the consequences of a declared war on the environment. Nature's retaliation is simply the law of cause and effect operating on a planetary scale, a feedback loop in which the conqueror discovers that the territory being destroyed is, in fact, the ground on which he or she stands.

**The Pathology of Disconnection: Anthropocentrism as a Cognitive Disorder**

Powers critiques anthropocentrism as a collective psychological malady. The cognitive and emotional disorders hinder humanity from recognising ecocide, which is evident to all to observe. His novels function as diagnostic tools, using the language of neurology and psychology to frame the ecological crisis as pathology of human consciousness. By doing so, he shifts the discourse from one of inevitable doom to one of potential, albeit difficult, recovery. The novels are not just elegies for a dying world; they are case studies of a species in need of therapy. The central allegory for this condition is found in *The Echo Maker.* The protagonist, Mark Schluter, suffers from Capgras syndrome, a rare neurological disorder that causes him to believe his devoted sister, Karin, is an identical imposter (45). He sees the form of his sister, hears her voice, and recognises her memories, but the affective connection —the feeling of recognising the person — is gone. Powers explicitly extends this individual diagnosis to the entire species. Through the reflections of his characters, he suggests that "... the whole race suffered from Capgras... humans have taken actions that destroy the ecological environment and threaten the survival of sandhill cranes by taking them as a profit-making tool" (780-89). Humanity looks at its closest kin, the intricate, life-giving biotic community, and fails to recognise it. Humans see a forest but perceive only the timber; they see a river but perceive only its resources. This delusion is not merely cognitive but deeply emotional, representing a catastrophic breakdown of the affective bond that underpins genuine recognition and empathy (368-79).

Lack of connection to nature is a form of pathology, and this is explored in *Bewilderment*. The title itself speaks to the mental state of a species trapped in its own destructive logics, unable to process the scale of the crisis it has created (23). The protagonist Theo's son, Robin, is labelled with a host of disorders, Asperger's, OCD, and ADHD, because his emotional responses to the world are deemed inappropriate by the dominant culture (67). However, the novel reframes his

condition as a form of radical clarity. He is unable to erect the psychological barriers that allow others to ignore the suffering of the planet. What others consider a disorder in Robin is, in fact, a state of unfiltered empathy in a world that has normalised its absence. The genuine bewilderment belongs to the society that medicates a child for grieving the extinction of a species.

By framing anthropocentrism within these medical and diagnostic contexts, Powers performs a crucial narrative manoeuvre. A condition that can be diagnosed can, in theory, be treated. *The Echo Maker* features a neurologist, Gerald Weber, who attempts to diagnose and understand Mark's condition (178). In *Bewilderment*, Robin's father, Theo, rejects conventional psychoactive drugs and seeks an experimental treatment—Decoded Neuro feedback—to heal his son by patterning his brain on his late mother's deep, biophilic connection to nature (156). The primary medicine prescribed to Robin is a potent, multifaceted dose of ecological empathy.

**Pathways to Empathy: Science, Trauma, and Neuro-divergence**

Powers assumes anthropocentrism as a pathology that could be healed. He explores the ways and means to overcome it. From Powers' perspective, science, trauma, and neuro-divergence could hold the key to overcoming anthropocentrism. It is undertaking an inner journey to realise biophilia, as opposed to necrophilia, which is dominant worldwide. The process necessarily presupposes an attitude to learn the havoc wrought by the anthropocentric worldview, which has given undue importance to humans in the biotic community (209-28).

For Powers, empathy is not just an emotion, but one that is informed and has its basis in cognition. Cognitive empathy, therefore, is scientific. In *The Overstory*, for instance, researcher Patricia Westerford represents a scientific approach to nature, particularly to trees. She comes to know through her research that trees are not solitary but rather members of a sophisticated network of beings. Patricia concludes that trees "feed and heal each other, keep their young and sick alive" through a vast underground of fungal networks (127).

Empathy cannot be solely cognitive; it must also be affective, involving specific emotions, including those related to trauma. Self-transformation is facilitated through both cognitive and affective dimensions. Douglas Pavlicek, a Vietnam veteran, in *The Overstory*, serves as an example of affective empathy, whose trauma enables him to appreciate the environment. While serving in the Air Force, he is shot and lands in the branches of a banyan tree that saves his life (203). He feels indebted to nature, especially trees, for his life. Mark Schluter's fatal car accident, in *The Echo Maker,* and the subsequent mental illness deprive him of his sense of self. Mark, interestingly, finds meaning and a sense of self in nature. His

struggle is likened to that of the sandhill cranes' struggle amidst the loss of their habitat. Trauma, in a way, shatters the anthropocentric ego, paving the way for a humble and yet more empathetic tie with the world (780-89).

What follows cognitive and affective empathy is a kind of radical empathy that spurs one to act. It is not enough to know and to feel; action must follow knowledge and feeling. Robin, in *Bewilderment,* embodies radical empathy through his neuro divergent gaze. He feels the pain species going extinct as a personal loss (89). While the adults look the other way, Robin knows, feels and is compelled to act to save nature. Decoded Neuro feedback, which he undergoes with the help of his father, Theo, is a form of empathy transfer. The process attempts to pattern Robin's brain on the recorded neural states of his late mother, an environmental activist with a deep, biophilic connection to nature (198). Robin embodies a pre-anthropocentric consciousness, a state of being before societal conditioning teaches a child to prioritise human concerns and tune out the non-human world. He is not broken; rather, he attunes himself to a reality that others have learned to ignore.

**From Empathy to Praxis: The Moral Imperative of Activism**

The achievement of ecological empathy, in Powers' fictional universe, is not a passive but rather a contemplative state. It is a catalyst that creates a moral imperative for action, or praxis. Once a character truly recognises the non-human world as a community of fellow beings suffering under a state of war, neutrality becomes untenable. This awakened consciousness places the individual on a collision course with the dominant culture and the structures of power that perpetuate ecocide. Conflict, therefore, is not a choice but inevitability. To become truly empathetic in an unempathetic system is to become an enemy of that system.

This progression is most explicitly traced in *The Overstory*. The novel's central group of activists follows a transparent praxis chain: their journey begins with understanding, sparked by Patricia Westerford's scientific revelations; it deepens into respecting, through personal, often traumatic, connections to the forest; and it culminates in acting (368-79). Their actions escalate dramatically, from non-violent tree-sitting in the canopy of a giant redwood named Mimas to acts of sabotage and arson against the logging industry. This escalation is not born of inherent radicalism but is a direct reaction to a system that meets peaceful protest with indifference and state-sanctioned violence. As Cicholewski mentions, their journey demonstrates the distinction between 'toxic empathy'—a passive pity that affirms the *status quo*—and 'critical empathy,' a politically charged form of empathy that actively "challenge[s] existing hierarchies" and is "committed to their transformation" (2-25). Their empathy is not a quiet appreciation of nature; it is a force demanding justice for the non-human world.

The activists in *The Overstory* are driven by this same desperate logic, forced to adopt the tactics of war to fight a war that society refuses to acknowledge (423). This theme is distilled to its purest form in *Bewilderment*. Robin's activism—his painstakingly detailed drawings of endangered species, his simple, hand-painted protest sign reading "HELP ME I'M DYING"—is a form of praxis born directly and uncorruptedly from his radical empathy (143). He is incapable of the moral compromises and psychological distancing that defines adult life. However, his fate highlights the central tragedy of this conflict: the most empathetic and clear-sighted individuals are often the most vulnerable. Robin's empathetic nature, amidst the unempathetic adults, leads him on a path of constant conflict with authorities, and his ultimate fate is a heartbreaking testament to the destructive power of an anthropocentric world that cannot tolerate a conscience that feels too deeply.

**Conclusion**

Richard Powers' novels can be viewed as a timely literary intervention in the Anthropocene era. Powers, like a conscience-keeper, deals with the malaise of the world, especially that of the Anthropocene, which regards the environment with little regard. The different characters in his novels reveal the need to cultivate empathy at the levels of cognition, affection and action. Ecological empathy is the antidote to ecocide. Powers' novels are not merely descriptive; they are performative since they lead to praxis, reflection in action. His narrative techniques intend to immerse the reader in an eco-centric worldview and to break down the illusion of anthropocentrism. It is right to assume that Powers' writing project is to aid humanity in rewriting its own foundational narrative. It is a call to embrace the far more ancient, humble, and sustainable narrative championed by philosophies such as those of Arne Naess and Aldo Leopold.

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