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## A study of Richard Powers' *The Overstory* from the perspective of eco-cosmopolitanism

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### Abstract

This study examines the ecological thought in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* from an eco-cosmopolitan perspective. First, drawing on Ursula K. Heise's concept of "deterritorialization," it explores the disintegration and reconstruction of the protagonists' cultural identities, revealing the cosmopolitan vision in the novel. Next, by integrating Heise's and Ulrich Beck's risk theories, it finds the risk-based cosmopolitan organization in *The Overstory*. Finally, this paper focuses on the themes of ecocentrism and by analyzing the presentation of trees as subjects in the novel, it rethinks the relationship between humans and trees and the responsibility that humans should take in the ecological crisis. This study aims to expand the cosmopolitan dimension of ecocriticism and offer new insights for contemporary ecological conservation practices.

Keywords: *The Overstory*, Richard Powers, eco-cosmopolitanism

### 1. Introduction

Richard Powers (1957-) is a leading contemporary American novelist. Powers has published 13 novels so far, with multiple works recognized by prestigious awards. It was with *The Overstory* (2018) that he won the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, following his earlier National Book Award win for *The Echo Maker* (2006).

With the intensification of climate change, humanity must develop new solutions

to address its potential risks. Enhancing environmental awareness and assuming responsibility for environmental protection are no longer the sole responsibility of the state, but must be undertaken by individual citizens and emphasized through collaborative efforts. *The Overstory* presents a new practice of environmental protection from a global citizen's perspective.

*The Overstory* tells stories of nine people from different countries whose lives or family history have a close connection with trees. Powers employs a nonlinear narrative structure, centering on the radical environmentalist movement adapted from real events, while interweaving the connections of the various protagonists with the event.

As an ecological novel, the majority of ecocritical scholarship on *The Overstory* has focused on aspects such as the material turn in ecocriticism (Qin 2024) and ecofeminism (Nikita 2020). Plenty of researches are carried out concerning the interdisciplinary field like the integration of scientific knowledge and literary expression (Karlijn 2019) and post-humanism (Song 2023). Other studies focus on the scale of realism (Adam 2020).

While existing scholarship has extensively analyzed *The Overstory* through ecocritical perspectives, few existing scholarships has analyzed it through the lens of eco-cosmopolitanism so far. By adopting an eco-cosmopolitan perspective, this paper explores viable ecological practices in the context of globalization, thereby providing a new angle on ecological protection.

## 2.Eco-cosmopolitanism

Eco-cosmopolitanism is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the consciousness of ecological community that transcends national and ethnic boundaries. As one of the most influential eco-critics in the 21st century, Ursula K. Heise puts forward the concept of eco-cosmopolitanism, which links the recent development trend of ecocriticism with globalization and cosmopolitanism. She advocates for a cosmopolitan perspective to replace localist thinking in reimagining the planet.

Deterritorialization, first proposed by Deleuze and Guattari and later developed by Heise, refers to the disconnection between socio-cultural practices and their geographic

locations. Population mobility, whether it is the conscious behavior of elite leisure travel or the passive mobility of working people at the bottom, has become an important force separating culture from place. In our globalized era, environmental challenges transcend local boundaries, demanding solutions that move beyond place-based approaches to cultivate a transnational ecological perspective. Therefore, a deterritorialized mode of thinking proves more conducive to the formation of both individual cultural identity and environmental preservation (Heise 69).

Heise further bridges ecocriticism with Ulrich Beck's risk theory, recognizing risk society as one of the most significant paradigms for conceptualizing global integrity. In a society with ecological risks, with the development of globalization and the spread of modernization risks, the boundaries of communities begin to blur and weaken, and risks show equal destructive effects on people in different communities and regions within their scope of action. In world risk society, risk perception and response mechanisms must evolve from local to planetary-scale perspectives (Heise 166).

Eco-cosmopolitanism represents a departure from traditional humanistic conceptions of cosmopolitanism by advancing an ecocentric ethical framework that fundamentally rethinks the human-nature relationship. Distinct from other human-centric strands of cosmopolitanism, ecological cosmopolitanism insists on an ecocentric approach, emphasizing the fundamental alignment of interests between human and nonhuman species. Heise promotes multi-species justice by challenging the idea that humans are superior beings entitled to dominate other life forms. She also rejects the violent domestication of other species for individual interests (163).

## 3.The Ecocosmopolitanism in *The Overstory*

The theme of this novel is to interweave the life narrative of trees with the fate of

characters, to explore the biological interconnection and the ethics of symbiosis with species, and to provide solutions. According to Ursula Heise's eco-cosmopolitanism, this paper analyzes *The Overstory* from the deterritorialization, risk theory and ecocentric approach, and further reveals the necessity to find the alternative path to achieve ecological protection, advocating for a globally interdependent ecological consciousness.

### 3.1 Deterritorialization of Human and Tree

The population movement driven by globalization weakens the connection between individuals and the native land. In the context of globalization, eco-cosmopolitanism holds that individuals can reshape their self-identities by re-examining and reconstructing their relationship with their local place, and by establishing themselves as ecological actors bearing global responsibilities. This is also the completion of the process of deterritorialization.

In Powers' novels, trees become the spiritual belonging of these cosmopolitans in a foreign land for them to connect with new culture. As a living body, trees live long and cannot speak. They have many functions, but they are always ignored. To some extent, trees are like metaphors for many marginalized groups in society, who are ignored and cannot be expressed despite the crisis.

The sentinel tree in Nick's family farm—a symbol of rootedness and generational continuity—embodies Heise's concept of deterritorialization. Nick's Norwegian-Irish ancestors arrived a century ago, sustaining themselves through agrarian labor and striving to construct and adapt to their American civic identity. They planted a chestnut tree on the farm, which accompanied their family for generations. This tree witnessed the war in the country and the rise and fall of the family. Therefore, the tree is also called the sentinel tree. No matter what happens, the family keeps the tradition of taking pictures of the sentinel tree every month. Nick's family has collected

thousands of these photos over the past 75 years, each one documenting the sentinel tree through generations.

However, the roots his family had planted withered with their death, and all of Nick's ties to this land were irrevocably altered by a tragedy. During a Christmas Eve family gathering, all members suffered fatal carbon monoxide poisoning except Nick, who survived due to being absent at the time. Great fear and loneliness came, and he only looked at the sentinel tree and longed for redemption. However, when the virus hit, the sentinel tree was not spared and was on the verge of death. It was the death of the sentinel tree that severed Nick's last connection to this land. He lost the belonging and identity again.

Nick's shift from grief over losing family and home to protecting endangered trees worldwide reflects his ecological consciousness guided by cosmopolitan principles. When selling his property, Nick met Olivia, his future partner in activism. She shared her plan to join a forest conservation campaign, and the two immediately connected, eventually joining an environmentalist group together. Within the organization, Nick rediscovered purpose and belonging—he came to see the forest as his new home and his fellow activists as family.

Adopting the codename "Guardian", Nick takes over the role of the fallen sentinel tree, transforming his grief into a commitment to protect living ecosystems. The sentinel tree fell due to a natural disease, but Nick decided to save other trees around the world that were on the verge of death due to human factors. In this way, Nick transformed his ecological thinking from the local to the global level and complete his deterritorialization through this process.

In *The Overstory*, trees are not only a symbol of a certain place, but also a link connecting the global ecosystem. The existence of trees inherently embodies deterritorialization through its symbiotic entanglement with ecosystems. In an ecosystem, there are no

independent individuals, nor even independent species. Every entity in the forest represents the forest itself. The novel not only depicts specific trees intimately tied to each protagonist, but also features the forest as a whole, subtly conveying the concept of an ecological community. The chestnut tree at Nick's house, the mulberry tree at Mimi Ma's, the chestnut tree at Ray and Dorothy's—these trees appear to grow independently, severed from the forest, yet remain fundamentally interconnected.

Patricia as a botanist went deep into the forest to study the impact of pests on trees and found an amazing fact that trees under insect attack not only mount individual chemical defenses, but also activate a collective warning network. Several trees in the forest have suffered from large-scale insect pests. She took samples, measured and repeatedly checked the experimental data. Finally, she concluded that the trees initially affected by insect pests would secrete a significant amount of chemicals to protect themselves. Secondly, the trees that encounter pests will give a warning, and all the other trees are closely connected to form a net. They share an immune system and protect each other.

Beyond these, trees also practice self-sacrifice to maintain the balance of the entire ecosystem. There stands a Douglas fir—known as the 'Tree of Giving'—which, when nearing death, channels its accumulated chemical reserves downward through its roots. These life-sustaining compounds are then dispersed via fungal networks, bequeathing its riches to the communal nutrient pool of forest.

In the wake of an ecologically triggered spiritual and cultural crisis, humans and trees as deterritorialized individuals both dedicate themselves to maintaining the sustainable development of the world.

### 3.2 Risk-based Cosmopolitan Political Model

Heise also draws on the cosmopolitan political suppositions of Eckersley and Beck to

further illustrate the ecocosmolitanism in the modern risk based society. Eckersley puts forward the concept of "transnationally oriented green states"(202). She observes that the foundation of human solidarity lies in an emotional attachment to local societies and ecosystems—a sentiment that motivates environmental victims worldwide to gradually form alliances. The concrete approach involves nations, while maintaining relative regional autonomy, collaboratively negotiating to experimentally establish transborder democratic systems (190).

The radical organization of environmentalism in *The Overstory* has established an independent order and model. The organization is called Life Defense Force. People spontaneously joined the organization, assigned tasks equally and participated in activities. The leader of the organization is code-named Mother N who briefly explained the current situation for the new members. They insisted on non-violent resistance activities and would conduct peaceful resistance training for the new members. Mother N said, "We're part of a very long, very broad process, all over the world. If those beautiful Chipko women in India can let themselves get threatened and beaten, if Brazilian Kayapo Indians can put their lives on the line, so can we" (Powers 266). Environmentalists across the world, driven by passionate conviction and ecological devotion, spontaneously organize to resist environmental destruction.

Beyond the initially passionate eco-activists, one protagonist intervenes as an outsider, maintaining a neutral stance toward capitalist logging practices and demonstrating notably weaker emotional ties to trees. Adam is a graduate student whose research topic is the identity journey and the personality factors of plant activists, whom he actually called misguided idealists.

There is an effect in psychology called the bystander effect. When a disaster happens,



people tend to wait for other people to rescue them while they keep watching. This psychology student knows the harm of the bystander effect, but he is also a practitioner himself. Adam climbed the crown of this ancient tree in order to complete his project and had an interview with Olivia and Nick. However, after spending several days in the trees, he became profoundly moved by the group's convictions and by each activist's unwavering dedication and passion. Ultimately, he voluntarily joined the organization and began participating in their activities.

Everyone sticks to order and strives for the same goal, with no one fighting alone. Patricia actively implemented her environmentalist strategy by establishing a global seed bank for endangered tree species. Her fieldwork spanned continents, and in this endeavor, she embraced collaborative support from conservationists worldwide.

However, under pressure from real-world hierarchies and institutional power structures, the organization ultimately dissolved. Heise also pointed out that Beck's cosmopolitan consciousness—rooted in the politics of shared risk—proposes a global cultural imaginary, but it also has its feasibility.

### 3.3 Human-tree Community

Heise clearly proposed the issue of biodiversity legislation and the right of nonhuman species in *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (2016). Eco-cosmopolitanism also carries forward the concept of ecocentrism, emphasizing the subjective status of non-human species.

Ecocentrism originated as a concept in environmental ethics, tracing its theoretical roots to Leopold's "Land Ethic." This philosophy expands the boundaries of community by incorporating non-human entities—such as water, air, and soil—into its moral framework (Leopold 204). Challenging the paradigm of human exceptionalism,

ecocentrism establishes an ethical framework based on the inherent worth of nature.

*The Overstory* centers its narrative focus on trees, embodying Powers' ecocentric philosophy. It vividly portrays the concept of "human-tree community", conveying a vision of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. The conflict between humanity and nature was once a dominant theme in literature—yet in *The Overstory*, several environmentalists instead become symbiont with the nature. The protagonists align themselves with the trees, joining their stand against the capitalists.

The novel explores the legal rights of trees, reflecting the ecocentric worldview. While the activists were holding a protest, Ray as a junior intellectual property lawyer was reading an article about the identity ethics of trees. This article, "Should Trees Have Standing?", holds the view that the law only recognizes human victims. The author of this article wanted to strive for the rights and interests of trees. Ray also started his thinking: what does right mean, and why do only human beings have it among all living things on earth? Human beings not only want to meet their own basic biological needs but also to impose their will on other creatures and turn them into human property. With the continuous progress of human civilization and economy, human thought and the legal system have failed to progress correspondingly.

Patricia meticulously recorded all her research findings, compiling them into an epic of trees. In her book, she recounts lesser-known tales of the forest—how it serves as humanity's pharmacy, profoundly influencing human health, and how the entire ecosystem operates with meticulous order, its coordination with fungal networks. In the final passage, she reflects: "The world does not exist to serve human purposes—what use are we to the trees? Yet they shelter and nourish all life, even offering shade to the woodcutter who fells

them" (Powers 173). However, humans have always been self-centered, extracting, plundering, and exploiting nature without restraint, thereby shattering the vision of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

Trees cannot speak nor resist, so activists raise their voices for them. Humans no longer hide under the shelter of trees, but climb up to stand with them in courageous defiance. The protagonists ceased addressing each other by human names, adopting instead the solemn titles of trees—an act that transcended nationality and race within their organization. They adorned themselves with body paint and costumes, transforming into creatures of the wild.

The protagonists all suffered varying degrees of harm during the resistance, yet none of them regretted their choice. The protesters chained themselves to the trees, refusing to let go until police attacked them with pepper spray to force them apart. In the novel the scene where these activists bond their fates with the trees, is a powerful metaphor for humanity's shared destiny with nature.

Living as tree-companions, the protesters shared in the trees' suffering, their fates becoming intertwined in the struggle. Olivia and Nick lived in a huge old tree called Mimas for two weeks, during which they seemed to be integrated with the tree. They explored the canopy, ate natural breakfasts, and encountered creatures never seen on the ground. One night, a raging storm struck, and the ancient tree swayed violently. Olivia and Nick clung tightly to the trunk to avoid being thrown off by the wind. In the midst of the tempest, they realized the resistance against the assault of nature was futile and the only thing they could do was surrender. So they relaxed their bodies, embracing the trunk as they swayed with the wind.

Despite withstanding the storm, Olivia and Nick could not resist the human-initiated

attack. Police deployed helicopter assaults to force the protesters to descend from the trees. Mimas, as the oldest and huge tree in this forest, also fell down, symbolizing their complete failure in this movement. The activists shifted their resistance tactics, adopting more radical forms of demonstration—arson attacks. Their target was a luxury resort under construction within the forested area. At the site, they left protest slogans graffitied in paint, marking their act of ecological defiance.

However, the movement ultimately paid a heavy price. The sacrifice of Olivia, the core figure of the organization, became a profound tragedy in the ecological resistance movement. Olivia's tragedy epitomizes the human-tree community metaphor—her fate is closely intertwined with that of Mimas, forming a symbiotic relationship.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper mainly explores the ecological crisis and human responses in *The Overstory* from the perspective of Heise's eco-cosmopolitanism. The main body of this paper focuses primarily on the transformation of the thoughts and identities of several protagonists through the lenses of deterritorialization, risk perspective, and ecocentrism. The power of trees played a crucial supportive role in protagonists' process of completing deterritorialization and the cultivation of ecological consciousness. Therefore, trees are not the invisible plants in the novel but constitute the spiritual world of the protagonists. In the action of protecting trees, their self-worth was finally affirmed, and their grief for their hometown and family finally found sustenance. This paper also argues that the novel envisions a trans-regional environmental organization which corresponds to the cosmopolitan political model in eco-cosmopolitanism. *The Overstory* embodies a philosophy of human-tree community, suggesting an essential interdependence between human destiny and ecological fate.

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