



ATMOSPHERES OF ANXIETY: AFFECTIVE ECOLOGIES IN THE OVERSTORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Richard Powers' *The Overstory* to investigate the emotive aspects of climate fiction. Drawing on affect theory, namely the writings of Sara Ahmed, Timothy Morton, and Brian Massumi, the study investigate how the novel creates a sense of communal ecological consciousness through wonder, grief, anxiety, and connectivity. Powers frames environmental catastrophe as an emotive event that circulates among human and nonhuman bodies, rather than merely presenting climate change as a scientific or political crisis. The study explores the ways in which arboreal metaphors, polyphonic structure, and narrative style contribute to an embodied feeling of environmental precarity. The paper makes the case that *The Overstory* uses affect to subvert anthropocentric perception and promote ecological relationality through qualitative textual analysis based on affect theory and ecocriticism. The story reorients readers' emotional ties and broadens their empathy beyond humans by emphasizing trees as communicative and agentic beings. In the end, this study shows that climate fiction functions as affective education as well as speculative narrative, transforming readers' perceptions of the planetary problem and fostering fresh approaches to ecological awareness.

KEY WORDS: Anthropocene; Ecological Consciousness; Affect Theory; Climate Fiction; Ecocriticism

OVERVIEW

Often called "cli-fi," climate fiction has become one of the 21st century's most pressing literary genres. Literature is increasingly addressing the emotional and perceptual difficulties presented by planetary disaster as the Anthropocene exacerbates environmental instability. *The Overstory* stands out among modern works due to its profound decentering of human agency and expansive narrative design. The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, which emphasizes interdependence across species and timescales, weaves several human lives around the slow, persistent existence of trees.

Although the novel's botanical science and environmental politics have been highlighted in ecocritical readings, its emotive architecture merits continued consideration. Climate change manifests as fear, grief, wonder, and dread rather than just data or policy argument. A useful foundation for comprehending how these emotions spread and influence communal consciousness is provided by affect theory. Sara Ahmed studies how emotions flow across bodies and connect communities, while Brian Massumi views affect as an autonomous intensity that comes before conscious emotion. Timothy Morton's concept of ecological entanglement, which emphasizes immersion within extensive environmental networks, further undermines human-centered perception. This paper makes the case that *The Overstory* creates an emotive ecology where readers encounter the climate issue as relational entanglement rather

than just knowledge. The novel creates atmospheric intensities that subvert anthropocentrism and foster ecological consciousness through its polyphonic structure and arboreal images. This research views climate fiction as an affective pedagogy that has the power to transform environmental ethics by examining grief, awe, anxiety, and solidarity as circulating affects.

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although ecocriticism has traditionally studied how nature is portrayed in literature, more recent research is using affect theory to explore the experiential aspects of the environmental problem. According to Timothy Morton's argument in *Hyperobjects*, climate change is more than just an immediate concern. Because it is widely dispersed throughout space and time, it is challenging to tell within traditional realism frameworks. Similar to this, Amitav Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement* that because contemporary fiction is still bound by individualist narrative tropes, it frequently falls short of accurately depicting climatic catastrophe.

By emphasizing relational interactions and physiological intensities, affect theory broadens these conversations. In his book *Politics of Affect*, Brian Massumi defines affect as pre-personal intensity, an impersonal force that influences behavior before it is consciously expressed. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* by Sara Ahmed illustrates how emotions move across society, affixing themselves to things and creating group identities. These theories shed light on how grief, hope, and fear can become political forces in environmental circumstances. *The Overstory's* botanical science and literary experiments are often cited by scholars. Powers' involvement with plant communication research, which challenges presumptions of vegetative passivity, is criticized. The division of the book into "Roots," "Trunk," "Crown," and "Seeds" highlights temporal layering and reflects arboreal growth. Only a small number of research, nevertheless, use affect theory to examine how these formal techniques produce atmospheric intensities that influence reader perception.

The difference is in how the novel mobilizes sensation as a transformative force, not in acknowledging its ecological commitments. This work fills that gap by combining affect theory and ecocriticism, contending that affective immersion, not didactic teaching, is how *The Overstory* creates ecological consciousness.

Defining the problem

The affective mechanisms via which climate fiction books activate ecological consciousness have received little attention, despite the fact that the genre has been the subject of much inquiry. Thematic content—deforestation, activism, biodiversity loss—is frequently given priority in analyses, but the ways in which narrative techniques result in embodied experiences of environmental catastrophe are not always examined.

This study is driven by two main issues: How does *The Overstory* create affective environments that subvert anthropocentric perception? In what ways do these environments promote ecological relationality? More precisely, what emotional frameworks allow readers to view trees as agentic, communicative entities rather than as background inertness?

By addressing these issues, the ethical role of literature in the Anthropocene becomes clear. If, as Morton argues, climate change is a hyperobject that transcends cognition, then narrative needs to use affect to fill in the gaps in perception. Thus, comprehending *The Overstory's* affective ecology reveals how fiction engages in environmental ethics by altering sensibility rather than just putting forward arguments.

SUPPLIES AND TECHNIQUES

This study uses qualitative textual analysis based on ecocriticism and affect theory. *The Overstory* is the main text. The stories of Patricia Westerford, Adam Appich, and Olivia Vandergriff are among the narrative arcs that are the subject of close readings, which explore how interactions with trees can trigger emotional changes.

Three important viewpoints are integrated into the theoretical framework. First, the investigation of pre-conscious physiological reactions portrayed in scenes of forest immersion is guided by Brian Massumi's concept of emotional intensity. Second, the way that readers and characters experience loss and hope is examined using Sara Ahmed's model of emotional circulation. Third, Timothy Morton's ecological philosophy contextualizes the novel's portrayal of interspecies entanglement.

The study's methodology addresses temporal transitions, metaphor, imagery, and narrative fragmentation. The method focuses on interpretive depth rather than data quantification, showing how literary methods create immersive environments. This multidisciplinary approach places literary study in the context of larger theoretical discussions regarding affect and representation of the environment.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The research finds that *The Overstory* is structured by four main emotive atmospheres: solidarity, awe, sadness, and anxiety. These affects function as circulating intensities that influence ecological consciousness rather than as discrete feelings.

LOSS OF SPECIES AND GRIEF

The book is filled with grief, especially when it comes to stories about extinction and deforestation. Characters lament not only the deaths of people but also the disappearance of ecosystems. This loss broadens empathy beyond anthropocentric boundaries. Trees, woods, and landscapes become objects of caring when sadness clings to them, as explained by Ahmed's theory of emotional circulation. Readers are encouraged to join in this grief, feeling the loss of a species as personal and real.

ARBOREAL TEMPORALITY AND AWE

The Overstory's persistent focus on arboreal temporality is among its most remarkable emotive techniques. In the book, trees are more than just picturesque backdrops; they live on periods that are significantly longer than those of humans. When Richard Powers emphasizes arboreal longevity—centuries of growth, endurance, and silent witnessing—he pulls readers away from their accustomed chronological frameworks. The gradual tenacity of banyans, redwoods, and chestnuts contrasts with human dramas that seem colossal in individual lives. There is a deep sensation of awe created by this time displacement.

The understanding of scale—spatial, temporal, and ontological—gives rise to awe. Characters see old trees whose lifespans dwarf documented human history on multiple occasions throughout the book. The human person is recast as ephemeral and vulnerable in these instances. These interactions' affective intensity is consistent with Brian Massumi's definition of affect as pre-cognitive intensity. Characters feel smallness, vertigo, and astonishment in their bodies before they can explain ecological ethics. The forest canopy transforms into an atmosphere that forces perception and re-calibrates the senses, rather than just an environment. The "ecological uncanny," as defined by Timothy Morton, is in line with this recalibration. According to Morton, ecological consciousness undermines human exceptionalism by

exposing our entanglement in enormous, unfathomable systems. Arboreal temporality creates this eerie impression in *The Overstory*. Trees have a distributed memory that is superior to individual cognition; they use rings and root networks to "remember" fires, droughts, and migrations. In contrast, human time, which is organized around output, advancement, and generational turnover, seems rushed and narrow-minded. The unnerving awareness that the nonhuman world has agencies and durations that relativize human centrality, rather than supernatural interference, is what causes the uncanny.

This amazement is further enhanced by the novel's depiction of tree communication. According to scientific references to chemical signaling and mycorrhizal networks, forests are relational communities rather than solitary species. Trees communicate throughout decades and seasons, making human speech hasty and abrupt. Established dichotomies between consciousness and inanimate matter are complicated by the idea that trees share warnings and nutrients. Readers are encouraged to envision a communicative environment that functions below the surface of human awareness, a discourse that has always been taking place underground.

But awe is more than just admiration for beauty. It has an ethical impact. The work fosters humility by presenting readers with arboreal temporality. Uncertainty surrounds anthropocentric assumptions, which hold that the planet's main story is based on human history. Because of the forest's resilience, humans are reframed as a single, fleeting moment in a longer ecological narrative. Human significance is not diminished by this decentering; rather, it places people in relational networks that require duty and care.

Arboreal temporality serves as affective pedagogy in this way. The emotional link that connects ethics and perception is awe. Readers are inspired to adopt a slower, more focused manner of being as a result of the appreciation of temporal immensity. *The Overstory* changes how time is perceived and comprehended by transforming trees from passive landscape into temporal agents through its evocation of ecological spooky and expanding duration.

ECOLOGICAL PRECARITY AND ANXIETY

Ecological precarity is portrayed in *The Overstory* as enduring concern rather than a spectacular apocalypse. The suspense of the book builds through gradual loss—clear-cut woods, extinct species, soil degradation, and bureaucratic indifference—rather than by catastrophic disaster or abrupt destruction. This gradual deterioration of the living environment creates an emotive atmosphere of discomfort that permeates the story. Anxiety permeates daily life and becomes a part of it.

Richard Powers frames dread as a slow realization, in contrast to conventional thrillers, when tension builds to pivotal moments of discovery or catastrophe. Forests are lost acre by acre, not all at once. Court cases come to a standstill. Warnings from science are ignored. The violence involved is what detractors frequently refer to as "slow violence"—a distributed, frequently undetectable devastation that takes place over long periods of time. Anxiety is heightened by this postponed type of disaster since it is difficult to resolve. Tension is not released by a single climactic occurrence. Instead, knowing that ecological collapse is cumulative and continuous, readers live in a posture of extended expectation.

This affective confusion is exacerbated by the non-linear form of the work. The story spans decades, continents, and viewpoints and is broken up into arboreal portions called "Roots," "Trunk," "Crown," and "Seeds." The unpredictable intersections between the lives of the characters reflect the intricate relationships seen in natural systems. Readers are unable to

establish a steady chronological trend due to temporal jumps. The dispersed character of climate change, with its origins and effects dispersed throughout time and geography, is reflected in this fragmentation. Thus, anxiety arises not just from the storyline but also from the perception of time as unstable and broken.

Brian Massumi's idea of affective intensity offers an illuminating perspective in this regard. According to Massumi, affect shapes body orientation before it solidifies into identifiable emotion at a pre-conscious level. Anxiety frequently comes before overt acknowledgment in *The Overstory*. Characters perceive a problem long before they express an ecological critique. This pre-cognitive knowledge is best illustrated by the uneasiness of a forester surveying a logged hillside or the uneasiness of a scientist witnessing dwindling tree populations. Before the mind creates an argument, the body senses a disturbance.

Perception itself is influenced by this pre-articulate worry. Once thought to be permanent and stable, forests are now considered to be delicate and threatened. There is a charged quality to landscapes; beauty and looming loss coexist. Readers also feel this increased sensitivity. Awareness of their frailty casts a shade on ordinary descriptions of trees or seasons. As a result, anxiety is not a single emotion but rather an atmospheric state. It permeates interactions, decisions, and silences.

Importantly, the novel does not resolve anxiety through definitive triumph. Activist efforts are met with partial successes and significant setbacks. The absence of narrative closure mirrors the unresolved status of climate crisis in reality. Yet anxiety is not purely paralyzing. By sustaining a low hum of affective intensity, the text keeps ecological precarity present in consciousness. The discomfort of unresolved tension compels attention.

In this way, ecological anxiety in *The Overstory* operates as both aesthetic strategy and ethical catalyst. The novel teaches readers to dwell within uncertainty rather than escape it. Through delayed violence, temporal fragmentation, and pre-conscious intensity, Powers constructs an anxious atmosphere that reflects the pervasive, diffuse impacts of climate change—an anxiety that lingers, unsettles, and ultimately demands response.

ACTIVIST COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY

In *The Overstory*, shared emotive experiences with trees serve as the primary source of activist community rather than abstract political theory. Characters go through emotional awakenings—shock, sadness, or amazement that connect them to woods and, in turn, to each other—before they express environmental beliefs. Solidarity is based on these shared emotional intensities. Feeling comes before political commitment, not the other way around. Throughout the book, a variety of people—including scientists, programmers, artists, and veterans—are inspired to become environmental activists following life-changing experiences with trees. Every episode creates a strong emotional impact, whether it's a woman's scientific finding concerning tree communication, a young man's near-death vision among branches, or a veteran's silent acknowledgment of the resilience of ancient redwoods. Despite being extremely intimate, these experiences are not solitary. Rather, they turn into areas of convergence. Characters discover a common emotional connection to trees when they first meet amid forests that are about to be cut down. The forest turns into a place of recognition, where individual intensities solidify into group links.

Affect theorists refer to this process as emotional circulation. Emotions flow from one body to another, forming relational networks that transcend personal subjectivity. Anger, anxiety, optimism, and veneration are all present among the activists in the woodland encampments. A climber who is high in a threatened tree acts out of an embodied sense of connection to the living thing below them rather than just out of ideological conviction. Others are lured into the same orbit of devotion after witnessing this passion and feeling its intensity. Thus, resonance—an alignment of affective states that turns individual concern into group purpose—is the means by which solidarity arises.

The context of the forest is essential to this change. Characters undergo a reorientation of values when they are taken out of the consumerist frameworks and urban routines. Attention sharpens and time slows. Affective symbiosis, or the reciprocal interchange of feelings between human bodies and arboreal presence, is fostered by weeks or months spent living among trees. Trees are viewed by activists as friends and co-residents rather than as resources. The individualistic logic that underpins a large portion of contemporary society is challenged by this relational transformation. Characters dedicate themselves to the collective survival of the group rather than to their own personal growth.

Crucially, activism is not romanticized in the book as effortless unification. Under danger of arrest or violence, disputes occur, tactics change, and dread grows. Even Nevertheless, these conflicts strengthen ties among the community. The emotional investment is increased when danger is shared. Other activists bear the burden of such vulnerability when one of them falters. The group develops into an emotive organism that reacts to both internal and exterior stimuli. When combined, these collective moods of wonder, fear, and optimism create what could be called a "affective ecology." The trees themselves are agents inside relational networks, therefore this ecology is not just about human participants. Voices, bodies, branches, and trunks all have varying intensities. The forest serves as both the generative field and the backdrop for activism. Solidarity manifests as a lived, felt reality—an embodied recognition that connection is essential to survival—in this dynamic area.

The story implies that environmental politics must start with a shift in vision by emphasizing affective symbiosis. In addition to policy objectives, activist communities are maintained by a common emotional sensitivity to life beyond ourselves.

ANALYZATION AND CONVERSATION

The results imply that *The Overstory* serves as an emotive mediator between embodied experience and abstract climate discourse. The story turns environmental crises into felt relational entanglement by drawing readers into the perspectives of other species.

Massumi's theory emphasizes how emotion comes before cognition, which explains why interactions with trees initiate change before logical reasoning. After experiencing moments of sensory immersion, such as climbing into canopies or listening to wind through leaves, characters frequently alter their route. Instead of emphasizing intellectual argumentation, these sequences emphasize physical sensitivity.

Ahmed's idea of emotional economics sheds light on the ways that optimism and sadness move between storylines. Trees, activism, and community evoke strong emotions that lead to a communal orientation. These circulations are reflected in the novel's structure, which branches and converges like underground roots. Morton's ecological philosophy puts the novel's critique of anthropocentrism in even more context. By portraying trees as agents of communication,

Powers undermines hierarchies of existence. Relational ontology—an understanding of interdependence—rather than sentimental anthropomorphism is the end consequence.

Crucially, the book avoids oversimplified optimism. The widespread anxiety highlights the vulnerability of ecosystems and activist endeavors. However, when camaraderie emerges, optimism endures. As a result, climate fiction turns into an emotive education that teaches readers to adopt broader ethical frameworks and see the world in new ways.

FINAL RESULTS

This study shows that *The Overstory* creates what can be called an affective ecology, a dynamic space where human and non-human bodies move through grief, amazement, anxiety, and solidarity. Richard Powers turns the climate issue from an abstract scientific discourse into an experienced, sensory experience with its complex polyphonic structure and persistent arboreal analogies. The novel stages environmental degradation as an atmosphere that permeates perception, alters emotional orientation, and reconfigures relational awareness, rather than just depicting it.

The story broadens the definition of grieving beyond the human race by following sorrow over species extinction and deforestation. Anthropocentric notions of temporal centrality are replaced with awe as a result of interactions with arboreal lifespan and communication. Through images of delayed ecological devastation and a disjointed timeline, anxiety permeates the text, reflecting Timothy Morton's description of the dispersed, hyperobject-like nature of climate change. Lastly, shared emotive experiences in forests give rise to solidarity, which binds people into relationally interdependent activist communities. Instead of just helping readers understand ecological interconnectedness academically, these emotional atmospheres work together to produce a multi-layered experiential environment.

The ability of literature to alter sensibility in the Anthropocene is revealed through the merging of affect theory—specifically, the perspectives of Sara Ahmed and Brian Massumi—with ecocriticism. Ecocriticism places pre-cognitive intensities into environmental ethics, whereas affect theory explains how these intensities orient bodies toward care or indifference. Emotional resonance comes before intellectual articulation in *The Overstory*. Readers are exposed in environments that rebalance perception rather than being lectured through overt moralizing. Forests become networks of communication rather than resources, and trees become agents instead than scenery. The climate catastrophe, which is sometimes seen as far or intangible, becomes concrete via experience.

In this way, climate fiction functions as both narrative representation and emotional architecture. It encourages the growth of thoughtful, patient, and attentive ways of being. The novel develops ecological attentional habits by fostering humility via awe, urgency through anxiety, and collective responsibility through solidarity. Thus, by making hyperobjects like climate change visible on the scale of actual experience, literature mediates them. Instead, it encourages readers to linger in relational entanglement rather than simplifying complexity.

These results have the wider implication that literary style is essential in fostering environmental consciousness. Polyphonic narration mirrors ecological interconnection; non-linear temporality reflects the dispersed rhythms of environmental change. Metaphor, particularly arboreal imagery, becomes a vehicle for reimagining coexistence. Through these strategies, *The Overstory* exemplifies how fiction can function as affective pedagogy—training readers to sense the world differently.

Future research may extend this affective framework to comparative analyses of other climate fiction texts, examining how diverse narrative traditions cultivate ecological awareness. Cross-cultural research could investigate if Indigenous environmental literatures or non-Western cli-fi exhibit comparable affective ecologies. Ultimately, however, this study affirms that understanding the affective power of literature remains essential in an era defined by environmental uncertainty. To imagine sustainable futures, societies must not only grasp ecological data but also cultivate the emotional capacities—care, humility, solidarity—necessary for collective survival.

RESOURCES

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