



**FORESTS RESILIENCE IN A CONTEXT OF GROWING URBANIZATION:
ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM AND ECOLOGICAL
INTERCONNECTEDNESS IN AMERICA THROUGH THE LENS OF EDWARD
ABBEY'S *THE MONKEY WRENCH GANG* AND RICHARD POWERS' *THE
OVERSTORY***

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Abstract : As urbanization strengthens across the world, forest ecosystem resilience has become an urgent concern, particularly in North America where ecological landscapes are transforming quickly. While Urban Political Ecology (UPE) has traditionally examined the socio-political drivers of environmental degradation, literary texts offer necessary perspectives on the cultural, ethical, and affective dimensions of forest resilience. The present study discusses how Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) and Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) contextualize forest resilience in the face of urbanization, contrasting their distinctive, yet complementary, narratives of ecological interconnectedness and environmental activism. By situating these novels as cultural artifacts reflecting and critiquing dominant anthropocentric worldviews, this paper argues that literature can be a potent influence on environmental consciousness. This triadic theory-informed comparative study examines how *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *The Overstory* envision forest resilience and environmental action through a framework of deep ecology, post-humanism, and ecofeminism. Through an exploration of nature's inherent value (deep ecology), decentering human agency (post-humanism), and relating ecological harm to domination systems and care ethics (ecofeminism), the research demonstrates how both novels articulate different yet complementary visions of ecological interdependence in a globalizing world. This qualitative comparative literary analysis considers both texts' narrative and symbolic functions of forests in relation to how their activism and resistance representations interact with the environmental pressures of urbanization. By foregrounding the entanglements of human societies with nature, the novels expose tensions between built environments and ecological health and offer speculative possibilities for more sustainable futures.

Keywords: Forests resilience, Urbanization, Environmental activism, Ecological interconnectedness

LA RÉSILIENCE DES FORÊTS DANS UN CONTEXTE D'URBANISATION CROISSANTE : L'ACTIVISME ENVIRONNEMENTAL ET L'INTERCONNEXION ÉCOLOGIQUE EN AMÉRIQUE À TRAVERS *THE MONKEY WRENCH GANG* D'EDWARD ABBEY ET *THE OVERSTORY* DE RICHARD POWERS

Résumé : À mesure que l'urbanisation s'intensifie à l'échelle mondiale, la résilience des écosystèmes forestiers est devenue une préoccupation urgente, en particulier en Amérique du Nord, où les paysages écologiques se transforment rapidement. Alors que l'écologie politique urbaine (Urban Political Ecology, UPE) a traditionnellement analysé les facteurs socio-politiques de la dégradation environnementale, les textes littéraires offrent des perspectives indispensables sur les dimensions culturelles, éthiques et affectives de la résilience forestière. La présente étude examine la manière dont *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) d'Edward Abbey et *The Overstory* (2018) de Richard Powers contextualisent la résilience des forêts face à l'urbanisation, en mettant en contraste leurs récits distincts mais complémentaires de l'interconnexion écologique et de l'activisme environnemental. En situant ces romans comme des artefacts culturels qui reflètent et critiquent les visions du monde anthropocentriques dominantes, cet article soutient que la littérature peut exercer une influence déterminante sur la conscience environnementale. Cette étude comparative, qualitative et fondée sur une approche théorique triadique, analyse la manière dont *The Monkey Wrench Gang* et *The Overstory* envisagent la résilience des forêts et l'action environnementale à travers les cadres de l'écologie profonde, du posthumanisme et de l'écoféminisme. À travers l'exploration de la valeur intrinsèque de la nature (écologie profonde), la décentration de l'agentivité humaine (posthumanisme) et la mise en relation des dommages écologiques avec les systèmes de domination et l'éthique du care (écoféminisme), la recherche montre comment les deux romans articulent des visions différentes mais complémentaires de l'interdépendance écologique dans un monde globalisé. Cette analyse littéraire comparative qualitative prend en compte les fonctions narratives et symboliques des forêts dans les deux textes, ainsi que la manière dont leurs représentations de l'activisme et de la résistance interagissent avec les pressions environnementales liées à l'urbanisation. En mettant au premier plan les imbrications entre les sociétés humaines et la nature, les romans révèlent les tensions entre les environnements construits et la santé écologique, tout en proposant des possibilités spéculatives pour des futurs plus durables.

Mots-clés : Résilience des forêts, urbanisation, activisme environnemental, interconnexion écologique

Introduction

The conflict between urbanization and preservation of natural resources has been a defining feature of American geography ever since rapid urbanization began with industrialization itself in the 19th and 20th centuries. As a result, natural geography has been converted into an area for economic growth. Resource-based ecosystems like forests have gradually been recognized as sources for vital ecological functions. Forests were

previously primarily considered as resources. Forests have several ecological functions. Although there is an increasing focus on sustainability, there is a considerable lack of literary scholarship on resilience within forests and urbanization. Studies on environmental literary criticism have explored various aspects of humans and nature relationships. Nevertheless, there have been no research endeavors exploring U.S. literary works on tensions within forest-nature and urbanization. This paper bridges these gaps within scholarship as it aims to combine literary research with political ecology and contributes toward understanding U.S. literary works on forest resilience as sites of resistance.

This particular research marks the first comparative analysis of Edward Abbey's *Monkey Wrench Gang* and Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, as it relates to forest resilience and urban pressure. It illustrates the manner in which these respective novels feature forests as more than just degraded ecosystems but also as a representation representing unsustainable development and Abbey's 1970s radical ecogism as it relates to Powers' more modern and well-informed environmental perspective. Methodologically, the study adopts an ecocritical methodology grounded in urban political ecology and supplemented with a comparative methodology from deep ecology, post-humanism, and ecofeminism. In order to ensure methodological transparency, the core texts - that is, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *The Overstory* - were selected based upon satisfying the three following criteria: (1) explicit engagement with forest ecosystems, (2) foregrounding of environmental resistance or activism, and (3) representing human-nature relationships within or against an urbanized socio-political framework. Through close reading, thematic coding, and discourse analysis, it examines how narrative structure, character development, and symbolic representation in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *The Overstory* symbolize forest resilience and environmental resistance. Coding was inductive in nature: the relevant textual units-scenes, metaphors, recurrent motifs, and character actions-are first tagged for ecological themes of resistance, interdependence, extractivism, and multispecies interaction. These codes were then grouped into thematic clusters that facilitate cross-textual comparison. The comparative analysis has been done in two steps: first, it spotted convergences and divergences in how each novel frames ecological agency; secondly, it explored how these narrative patterns resonate or unsettle the conceptual premises of deep ecology, post-humanism, and ecofeminism. By its integration of text analysis and socio-historical context with ecological theory, the study makes an intervention in literary ecocriticism by showing how fiction can challenge anthropocentric urban paradigms and propose alternative, sustainability-oriented models of human-nature relationship. This integrated approach ensures that textual interpretations are both theoretically informed and methodologically traceable, allowing the reader to trace step-by-step the paths of analysis from coding to interpretation. It thereby inserts a distinctive interdisciplinary model into the discussion of environmental literature, activism, and urban ecological philosophy.

1. Urbanization and its impact on forests

1.1 Overview of urbanization as a global phenomenon, specifically focusing on the U.S.

Urbanization, understood as the process of transforming rural areas into urban locales, has become a global phenomenon that has, in particular, gained much strength in the past two hundred years. The transition from agrarian economies to industrial and

service-based ones has had a massive impact on social structures, economic systems, and environmental conditions. While urbanization is truly a global phenomenon, much of the dynamics discussed here hold particular importance within a U.S. context, where rapid urbanization transformed the landscape and impacted social, economic, and environmental progress.

1.1.1. Global urbanization trends in the US

The global urban population has been growing steadily since the Industrial Revolution, driven by factors such as industrialization, technological advancements, and rural-to-urban migration. The United Nations says that by 2020, more than 55% of the world's population lived in urban areas, and this number may continue to increase to reach 68% by 2050. Particularly within developing countries, city growth in Asia, Africa, and Latin America seems to show no signs of slowing down in this boom of urbanization. However, in developed countries, including the United States, this urban growth has resulted in several negative social and environmental impacts, such as sprawl, depletion of resources, and environmental degradation.

In the real sense of the word, urbanization began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States with industrialization, the expansion of the railroad, and immigration. This change in the American landscape, from predominantly rural to increasingly urban, was marked by the rise of cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In 1800, only 6% of the U.S. population lived in urban areas; by 1920, the number had grown to over 50%. Now, more than 80% of Americans live in urban areas, with sprawling metropolises covering vast swaths of land.

The rise of suburbanization after World War II had a strong impact on the urban structure of the United States. As industries started moving from the center of the cities to suburban areas, the population in these areas started to increase tremendously. This was enabled through the widespread availability of cars, federal housing programs, and infrastructure like highways. As a result, metropolitan areas in the United States have experienced a great deal of urban sprawl, including the widespread development of low-density housing, commercial, and industrial structures at the expense of agricultural land and natural habitats.

1.1.2. Environmental consequences of urbanization in the U.S.

The process of urbanization in the United States has resulted in various prominent environmental challenges. A particularly critical issue is the degradation of natural habitats attributable to urban sprawl. As metropolitan areas extend their boundaries, the removal of forests, wetlands, and farmland occurs to accommodate new residential and infrastructural developments, thereby disrupting ecosystems and diminishing biodiversity.

A 2018 study published by the organization American Forests noted that cities across the U.S. have lost more than 50 million acres of urban tree canopy since 1980, which negatively affects air quality, stormwater management, and overall environmental health. Moreover, urbanization in the U.S. has indirectly caused what are known as heat islands: cities being considerably warmer than their hinterlands because of the physical

properties of a high concentration of buildings, roads, and other heat-absorbing surfaces. It would add to discomfort and the aggravation of the effects of climate change. With growth, the cities are at the top of the agenda for urban planners, environmentalists, and policy thinkers.

1.2 Urbanization and social inequality

Along with environmental concern, urbanization in the United States has also been linked to social inequities. As the cities grew, so did economic differences, especially once suburban development became a possibility. Many projects like highway construction bypassed poor inner-city areas, which inadvertently increased the density of poverty within urban cities since the population that had the means was moving into the suburbs. This phenomenon was instrumental in breeding racial segregation and creating an urban-rural divide whereby communities of color and impoverished populations faced limited access to basic resources, education, and health care services. Similarly, urban growth has also led to the "gentrification" of many city neighborhoods, where higher-income residents move into previously underdeveloped areas, displace lower-income residents, and increase inequality.

1.3 Urbanization in literature and media

Urbanization as a metaphor for progress and loss appears as a common theme in American literature. Edward Abbey's *Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) presents a commentary on road and infrastructure developments creeping into the American Southwest. Abbey's protests against national anxieties related to the sly entry of urban and industrial expansion into the American Southwestern region are reflected as eco-sabotage in the novel. Coming from a completely different direction, Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) highlights the effects of urbanization on nature as a result of an estrangement between humanity and nature.

Although urbanization has acted as an engine for economic and cultural progress, it also leads to destroying ecosystems, degrading biodiversity, and aggravating social inequality. Suburban growth after World War II and low-density developments have caused forest fragmentation and decreased ecological resilience. Abbey describes this encroachment with suggestive descriptions of desert infrastructure, like that of Glen Canyon Dam, as an icon for excess. Powers, on the other hand, describes forest destruction processes that remain invisible at times and very subtle at others via multiple character storylines that demonstrate the complexities surrounding tree life. Together, these novels not only criticize unchecked urbanization but also, more fundamentally, introduce its ethical and ecological implications and encourage a consideration of forest ecosystems as life itself. Although a more central role for empirical research on urban ecology would be beyond the scope of a literary analysis, it might improve the understanding of ecological perceptions and consciousness reflected and propagated within these novels. A sustainable urban life requires more than policy; it demands cultural, as Abbey and Powers have done, frameworks.

2. Comparison of urbanization and its threat to forests in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *The Overstory*

While both Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) and Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) provide profound critiques of urbanization and its devastating impact on forests, they do so within different contexts and through different literary styles. Despite these differences, however, both novels share a common focus on the encroachment of urban sprawl, the exploitation of nature, and the resulting degradation of ecosystems, particularly forests. Both works, through the perspective of environmental activism, draw on the conflict between nature and industrial civilization, pointing out the urgency of preserving wilderness areas and criticizing human beings for always developing at the expense of ecological preservation.

2.1 Urbanization versus wilderness

Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) and Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) both negotiate the dialectic of urbanization and ecological decline, though in markedly different narrative modes and historical frames. In Abbey's novel, the American Southwest becomes a symbolic and material vanguard of wilderness resisting encroaching civilization. By depicting his environmentalist protagonists' anarchic sabotage of dams and highways, Abbey enacts a preservationist ideology that casts cities as antagonistic to natural processes. A more careful examination of, for instance, Doc Sarvis' definition of Glen Canyon Dam as a "concrete straitjacket" will show just how Abbey associates infrastructure with political force, a central precept of UPE.

Compared to Abbey, Powers's *The Overstory* employs a more expansive, polyphonic structure, tracing human lives that intersect through their involvement with trees. While not bound to a single region, Powers presents urbanization as a ubiquitous force of ecological fragmentation. His cityscapes (marked by hyper-industrialization and detachment from nonhuman life) illustrate and what UPE theorists refer to as the metabolic circulation of urban nature. To cite an example from Neelay's narrative, "the sight from the corporate tower 'sealed off from anything that photosynthesizes'" illustrates the epistemic ignorance of urbanism with regard to the role of non-human nature. Powers foregrounds forests as dynamic agents rather than passive scenery, aligning with contemporary ecocritical emphases on multispecies entanglement (Trexler 2015; Iovino and Oppermann 2014).

To clarify the socio-political forces driving urban expansion, this analysis adopts the framework of UPE, which conceptualizes the city as metabolically embedded within broader ecological and economic systems (Heynen et al. 2006; Swyngedouw and Kaika 2014). Both novels demonstrate the UPE concept that environments are continuously recreated via political and economic intervention, but they are narrated differently. In *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, the physical assault on the desert is paired with the symbolic violence of capitalist development. *The Overstory* suggests that even hyper-urban environments sustain fragile networks of ecological interdependence. Both texts also contribute to current environmental humanities research on activism and multispecies justice (Tsing et al. 2017). Abbey's direct-action ethos confronts readers with the ethics



of sabotage, whereas Powers presents introspective and morally ambiguous modes of resistance, as seen in Olivia's assertion that "the trees are calling." Together, these novels serve as literary case studies through which forest resilience under urban pressure can be understood ecologically and politically. In *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Chapter 6 depicts industrial expansion as "a disease eating into the desert," capturing Abbey's vision of urbanization as desecration. Also, in Part III of *The Overstory*, "the trees as 'social creatures... connected by invisible networks'" juxtaposes with the divisive paradigm of urban planning. Both novels therefore resist dominant narratives of inevitable environmental degradation by portraying forests as complex, endangered systems that demand new paradigms of coexistence and resilience.

2.2 *The critique of urbanization: destruction of the natural world*

Both *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) by Edward Abbey and *The Overstory* (2018) by Richard Powers articulate forceful critiques of urbanization as a driver of ecological devastation, though they do so through different environmental visions. Abbey draws on a radical conservationist ethos rooted in 1970s countercultural activism, while Powers develops a more networked sensibility attuned to ecological interrelation and post-Anthropocene vulnerability. In both novels, urbanization emerges not merely as physical expansion but as an ideological force that restructures ecosystems and suppresses nonhuman agency.

Abbey situates his narrative in the American Southwest, a landscape characteristic of what Lefebvre (1991) terms "abstract space," where industrial rationalities overwrite natural geographies. His self-styled "eco-saboteurs" respond viscerally to the commodification of the wild. Constructions such as Glen Canyon Dam and expanding highways symbolize modern power's reach. Doc Sarvis's lament that the nation has become "one big chain of strip malls... and parking lots" (E. Abbey, 1975, p. 231) illustrates both ecological degradation and moral decline. A closer look at Chapter 6, in which the dam is described as a "vast coffin lid across the canyon," serves to further underscore Abbey's symbolic alignment of infrastructure with ecological death and UPE notion of reshaping nature through capital.

Powers likewise critiques the ecological costs of urbanization, though through a polyphonic and dispersed narrative. *The Overstory* presents urban life as a normalized yet destructive condition (Nixon 2011). Characters such as Olivia Vandergriff and Patricia Westerford dramatize the erasure of arboreal life within anthropocentric worldviews. Olivia's plea that "the trees are not going to wait" (R. Powers, 2018, p. 343) affirms an activist ethos grounded not in nostalgia but in futurity and interdependence. Passages such as Neelay's realization that the world seen from a corporate tower is "sealed off from anything that photosynthesizes" reveal how urban spaces enforce epistemic distance from nonhuman life.

Urban Political Ecology (UPE) clarifies these dynamics by framing urbanization as the metabolic reshaping of labor, nature, and capital (Heynen et al. 2006). Abbey's critique targets this metabolic transformation: his characters attack not only roads and machines but the political economy that makes them, as in the moment when Hayduke declares, "the real enemy is the system that makes this junk". Powers, in contrast, emphasizes the internal contradictions of urban participation, showing characters who

recognize their complicity yet choose resistance, revealing ecological consciousness arising from within metropolitan life.

While Abbey's narrative is linear and combative, Powers constructs a decentralized structure that mirrors the mycorrhizal networks his novel describes. This narrative design exemplifies material ecocriticism (Iovino & Oppermann 2014), allowing trees to "speak" through their transformative effects on human lives. In Part II, Patricia reflects that "cities are just forests with more concrete." It is a reevaluation, even of urbanization itself, as an ecological formation shaped by human intervention. Thus, the novel critiques urbanization both through content and form.

Reading these works together clarifies how American literature represents urbanization as a force of ecological disruption across different periods and genres. In *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Chapter 8's portrayal of infrastructure as a "mechanized invasion" underscores Abbey's belief that urban sprawl annihilates desert integrity. Meanwhile, Powers's portrayal in Part III of trees as "social creatures... connected by invisible networks" challenges readers to conceive of ecological systems as active even within urban environments. Despite their differences, both novels demand a rethinking of human-nature relations and insist that forest resilience cannot be imagined without confronting the economic and political systems driving environmental deterioration. In sum: they call for a literature and an ecology that, in concert, resist the narratives subordinating nature to the expansion of the metropolis.

2.3 Urbanization and the disconnection from nature

Both *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *The Overstory* share common links and bonds in terms of representing urbanization as an ever-divesting force separating humans from nature. This critique is not merely environmental but epistemological, challenging the systems of knowledge and valuation that structure modern urban life. Both Abbey and Powers depict cities as spaces that obscure ecological interdependence behind mechanistic and commodified relationships to land.

In Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, this alienation is rendered through characters' visceral reactions to the desert's transformation into consumable infrastructure. As one character exclaims, "They were making the whole desert a parking lot... He couldn't stand it anymore" (E. Abbey, 1975, p. 103). The phrase "glorified shopping center" signals Abbey's condemnation of consumer capitalism that converts sacred land into interchangeable commercial space. A careful examination of Chapter 6 of the novel demonstrates how this symbolic criticism might be realized, as there is an explicit drawing together of a new access road and the "scar gouged into living flesh" that underscores the UPE notion of nature redesigned via capitalist needs.

Powers' *The Overstory* extends this critique across a broader psychological and ecological canvas. Through Adam Appich, a behavioral psychologist molded by urban institutions, Powers shows how urban rationality shapes cognition itself. Initially Adam embodies what UPE scholars call instrumental urban logic, but he shifts when confronted with forest complexity: "In the city, things are black-and-white... the trees are... an entirely different kind of logic" (R. Powers 2018, p. 152). It becomes more meaningful



when juxtaposed with Adam's own observation in Part I that he has been learning from city life "to categorize everything on sight," but the forest resists being categorized because it refuses to be confined within man-made boundaries. The contrast marks an epistemological gap between categorical urban thinking and relational ecological understanding. While Powers invokes research on urban ecological alienation (Louv 2008; Wolch et al. 2014), he also supports this notion with specific textual elements, for instance, Neelay's revelation that "the city blocks out everything that grows" within Part III, a metaphor for sensory and cognitive enclosure. Yet *The Overstory* complicates simple narratives of urban disconnection. Not all characters are estranged from nature: Patricia Westerford, a marginalized dendrologist, models a form of knowledge that bridges scientific practice and forest attunement. Powers thus suggests that ecological consciousness can emerge within, rather than outside, metropolitan environments. The scenes involving Patricia working as a researcher with a research center and road traffic noise on either side (in Part II) demonstrate that ecological understanding does extend into a liminal space.

This perspective aligns with recent UPE accounts of "urban ecological citizenship" (Kaika 2017), which frame cities as sites of ecological negotiation rather than inevitable destruction. Abbey's 1970s radicalism, by contrast, positions wilderness as necessarily "other" to the city; in Chapter 4 he calls urban development "the enemy of everything wild and free." Nevertheless, even Abbey sometimes suggests interdependence, as when Hayduke admits in Chapter 8 that "the desert needs defenders who know the city's tricks," thus implying interdependence as suggested by UPE. Powers further dissolves the nature-city binary. In *The Overstory* Part IV, Patricia reflects that "the world is failing precisely because no novel can make the contest for the world seem as compelling as the struggles between a few lost people," pointing to the cultural forgetting of ecological centrality. Olivia Vandergriff's vision of a city reorganized around reciprocity rather than extraction reframes urban space as potential ecological habitat. "The streets would be lined with trees older than the buildings" becomes a symbolic opposing model to capitalist city structure, emphasizing instead the role of narrative as a way of remapping ecological futures. Together, these novels portray urbanization as a contested terrain, one that can sever human-nature relations but can also, through resistance or re-imagining, reopen possibilities for ecological attunement.

3 Environmental activism as resistance to urbanization in Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and Richard Powers' *The Overstory*

3.1 Radical activism in The Monkey Wrench Gang

Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is at once protest novel and eco-manifesto, presenting eco-sabotage as moral protest against industrial growth. In the American Southwest, the novel narrates the exploits of four heroes (George Hayduke, Doc Sarvis, Bonnie Abzug, and Seldom Seen Smith) who engage in acts of sabotage to save the wilderness from urban development. Abbey's anarchic stance is unambiguous: nature must be preserved even if this means lawbreaking, bringing conservation to a level of moral duty beyond legality. Abbey condemns urbanization as a profaning of nature, transforming sacred lands into commodities. Hayduke's outrage testifies to the loss:

"They were making the entire desert a parking lot, a kind of glorified shopping center. He couldn't take it any more" (E. Abbey, 1975, p. 103). Such transformation, in Abbey's view, is not only an ecological destruction but also a political and spiritual desecration.

The gang's sabotage, blocking roads, cutting power cables, setting fire to things, is portrayed as a defense against ecological catastrophe. As Abbey succinctly puts it, "The only way to save the desert was to destroy the desert" (E. Abbey, 1975, p. 210). This paradox points to his argument that only extreme actions can answer the ferocity of industrialization. According to Urban Political Ecology (UPE), Abbey's critique is explained by interpretations of how urban development is being capitalized at the command of and to the expense of ecological wholeness (Heynen et al., 2006). His protagonists are against not just urban sprawl but the economies which make them possible.

The novel also supports deep ecology, which espouses nature's intrinsic value (Naess, 1973). Abbey's heroes fight not for themselves but for the land itself, and they aim to re-establish an old spiritual relation with the wild. This revolutionary position aligns with recent eco-activist movements like the Earth Liberation Front, which question whether or not legal actions can suffice to stem ecological collapse (Garvey, 2013; Bourke, 2017). Standing in opposition to Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, which promotes environmental activism by policy and conscious, Abbey's novel promotes disruptive resistance. While promoting harmony, Abbey is adamant on confrontation. Both authors introduce a scope of environmental resistance, from collaborative to confrontational. Lastly, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* forces readers to reconsider the morality and effectiveness of environmental activism in an era of untrammelled urbanization. Abbey's call is desperate: if institutions will not protect nature, then resistance, and radical resistance, is not only necessary, but justified

3.2 Activism in *The Overstory*: a broader, philosophical resistance

Where Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* promotes direct, militant action, Richard Powers' *The Overstory* presents a broader, more philosophical view of environmental activism. Powers' novel, which explores the human relationship with nature through several characters and over several decades, is less about direct action than about ethical consideration. Activism in this work is not only a response to the immediacy of ecological devastation but also the result of a more profound moral and spiritual appreciation of the human position within the ecosystem.

Characters like Olivia Vandergriff and Douglas Pavlicek embody different paths to activism, Olivia driven by moral urgency, and Douglas by a philosophical awakening to ecological interdependence. Rather than sabotage, their resistance is contemplative and relational, aimed at reconnecting people with nature. "What we're asking is not for a moment of remembrance or regret, but to save the future. The trees are not going to wait" (Powers, 2018, p. 343), Olivia pleads, underscoring the long-term stakes of unbridled urbanization. Powers denounces urban sprawl not merely as environmental havoc but as a more profound rupture in human consciousness. This is in line with deep ecology, which argues that nature has value regardless of its utility to humans (Naess, 1973). Douglas reflects: "Every tree has a story to tell, but the story of trees is not our story. They are



alive, but not for us" (R. Powers, 2018, p. 430), a shift from human-centered to ecocentric activism. Urban Political Ecology (UPE) also contextualizes Powers' criticism by illustrating how cities represent political and economic processes that shape how nature is exploited (Heynen et al., 2006). Olivia's battle against deforestation challenges these power dynamics, illustrating that the preservation struggle is also a control and values struggle.

Lastly, while Abbey encourages radical upending, established in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Chapter 10, wherein ecological justice is espoused through sabotage, Powers espouses a perceptual and moral transformation grounded on healing over a long term. *The Overstory*, particularly Part IV, presents a more relational form of environmentalism whereby figures like Patricia and Mimi uphold that change enduring happens not through conflict but through deep ecological awareness and the restoration of the kinship of human and nature.

3.3 Radical versus philosophical activism and connection to nature

The Monkey Wrench Gang and *The Overstory* represent alternate forms of environmental activism, refracted through their respective characters' connection to the natural world and urbanization. Abbey's book preaches extremist, passionate ecotage, while Powers offers instead a more introspective, morally grounded activism predicated upon ecological interconnectedness and stewardship on behalf of generations to come.

Abbey's heroes, George Hayduke in particular, explain a visceral attraction to wilderness, reacting to the intrusion of urbanization as an existential threat. Their outrage and fury drive them to activism that involves direct sabotage. Hayduke's outrage is illustrated in his lament: "They were turning the whole desert into a parking lot, a glorified shopping center. He couldn't stand it anymore" (E. Abbey, 1975, p. 103). Preserving nature for them is to actively halt industrial development through illegal, disruptive action. Powers' activists, by contrast, are driven by a deeper philosophical understanding of nature's intrinsic value. Olivia Vandergriff speaks to a broader moral imperative: "What we're asking is not for a moment of remembrance or regret, but to save the future. The trees aren't going to wait" (R. Powers, 2018, p. 343). Here, activism is not just about reacting to destruction but preserving ecological balance for the long term. Douglas Pavlicek's insight resonates with Powers' broader theme: "Every tree has a story to tell, but the story of trees is not our story. They are alive, but not for us, not for us alone" (R. Powers, 2018, p. 430). This framing (nature as autonomous) tracks deep ecology, which argues that nature has value regardless of human usefulness (Naess, 1973). Powers' activism thus embraces ecological humility, rejecting anthropocentrism in favor of interdependence.

Where Abbey romanticizes wilderness and casts activism as a last stand against industrialization, Powers presents a reconnection-based systemic critique. Urban Political Ecology (UPE) provides a framework for both: Abbey's characters resist the power structures driving urbanization, and Powers' book exposes how political and economic systems perpetuate ecological degradation (Heynen et al., 2006). Both novels respond to the challenge of urbanization in various ways: Abbey exhorts raw, aggressive action on the basis of individual identification with the land, visible in Chapter 7 of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, where members pledge to "defend the desert with their lives." In contrast,

The Overstory, particularly Part II, is based on a more introspective, ethical approach to activism on the basis of a sense of life's.

3.4 *The role of urbanization and the effect of activism*

Both Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and Richard Powers' *The Overstory* offer scathing denunciations of urbanization, but with different emphases. Abbey focuses on the material consequences of development (dams, highways, factory cities) and his protagonists respond with instant, radical resistance. Powers, though, sees urbanization as a symptom of a larger cultural estrangement from nature, and this demands sustained moral and philosophical transformation. Activism in both books is deeply personal but also social. Abbey's heroes act with urgency and revolt, sometimes illegally, to protect nature from threats. Hayduke personifies this impromptu revolt: "A man has to fight back, somehow. A man has to take a stand" (E. Abbey, 1975, p. 104). This "environmental radicalism" is about preventing destruction in the moment.

Powers, however, frames activism as a recognition of ecological interdependence. Characters like Olivia Vandergriff and Patricia Westerford act out of a moral responsibility to sustain life systems. As Westerford writes, "Trees know when we're close by. the perfumes they release change when we're near" (R. Powers, 2018, p. 273). Powers' activism is not only about saving trees but about restoring lost relationships between humans and the natural world. Abbey's is a desperate, place-based vision, one aimed at resisting specific incursions. Powers advocates structural change and long-term ecological identification. This is a larger difference: Abbey's protagonists struggle to preserve wilderness; Powers' protagonists work to restore common ecological consciousness.

In spite of their divergent approaches, both writers emphasize nature as alive and dynamic. Abbey's protagonists fight wild places from devastation, whereas Powers' encourage us to remember that humans belong to a gigantic, interdependent world. Their writings enrich environmental ethics, even if literary analysis has to be supported by empirical research to comprehend urban ecological transformation completely. The conceptual framework of Urban Political Ecology (Heynen et al., 2006) bridges this difference, examining how urban expansion interacts with ecological resilience. Together, these novels offer divergent visions of activism: Abbey supports immediate, radical revolt, as seen in *The Monkey Wrench Gang's* sabotage climactic final chapter 12, whereas Powers, in *The Overstory* Part IV, supports persistence and introspective change through ecological reasoning. Divergent, both compel readers to recognize their moral responsibility to nature and to imagine sustainable futures in the wake of speeding urbanization.

4. Ecological interconnectedness: comparing Abbey and Powers' view on forests as life-sustaining systems

Both Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and Richard Powers' *The Overstory* present forests as complex, holy, and life-sustaining systems, positioning them as central locations of resistance to the speeding forces of urbanization and environmental devastation. While differing in literary style and philosophical emphasis, both writers

make a case for a fundamental reexamination of human relationship to the natural world, one grounded in interconnectedness, moral accountability, and active environmental stewardship.

4.1 Narrative style and theoretical approach

Abbey's narrative is similarly combative, satirical, and situated within the American individualist tradition of resistance. His ecocriticism is rooted in deep ecology and biocentric ethics, which give nature inherent value regardless of human use. *The Monkey Wrench Gang* employs satire and direct action to depict, as a drama, the necessity of protecting the American Southwest's desert landscapes from infrastructural encroachment. But beyond mere representation of resistance, the novel strategically ties its anarchic humor and episodic structure to a critique of industrial modernity: the tonal shifts that unsettle the reader, the exaggerated caricatures, and the performative scenes of sabotage serve as narrative devices through which the absurdities of urban-centric development are laid bare and the moral legitimacy of state-managed extraction interrogated. Powers, conversely, uses a more philosophical, multi-perspective structure that spans continents and centuries. *The Overstory* advances a post-humanist and ecofeminist worldview, knowing forests as wise webs of life that transcend humanist boundaries. His use of interconnected character threads and tree symbolism reveals a vision of ecological interdependence rooted in systems thinking and planetary ecology (Alaimo, 2016; Heise, 2016). More crucially, the novel's dispersed narrative architecture functions as an ecological argument unto itself, in which decentralizing the human plotline and elevating arboreal agency serves to restructure the attention of the narrative, showing through form how literary worlds can reorient epistemological priorities away from urbanized, human-centered models toward multispecies relationality. The cumulative effect thus shows not only how each writer reflects on the critique of urbanization, but also how they embed this critique in the mechanics of storytelling-through narration, structure, symbolism, and tonal modulation-offering distinct literary interventions into contemporary ecological thought.

4.2. Activism: radical confrontation versus philosophical engagement

The novels split sharply in their representations of activism. Abbey's characters engage in eco-sabotage, battling industrial machinery and urbanization as tangible enemies. Theirs is very personal, revolutionary activism, often performed independently of mainstream environmental interests. Forests (or deserts, rather) become symbols of resistance here, tough, sacred, and under siege. Yet, what gives this activism its importance is less the dramatic confrontations than the way in which the narrative frames rebellion as an embodied, place-rooted ethic: the characters' improvised tactics and their confrontational humor disclose a politics of immediacy that configures protection of the environment as a direct moral duty rather than an institutional objective.

Powers' protagonists, however, embody a slower, more introspective form of activism. Their engagement with the world is science-informed, grief-stricken, loving, and ecologically sympathetic. Rather than direct sabotage, their form of resistance is philosophical (indeed spiritual) based on the conviction that protecting nature is central to protecting humanity as a whole. Powers' portrayal finds its congruence with the ethics of slow violence and non-anthropocentric environmental justice (Nixon, 2011; Ghosh,

2021). More important, it reconfigures activism not as an alternative to Abbey's militancy but as a complementary ecological ethic: in emphasizing interdependence, long temporal scales, and collective vulnerability, Powers shifts the discussion from heroic intervention to systemic transformation and shows how ecological activism can operate by means of narrative patience and distributed agency.

Taken together, these contrastive modes of activism form a continuum rather than a binary, with Abbey's urgent, confrontational resistance versus Powers's reflective, systemic engagement synthesizing to reveal how contemporary environmental fiction is faced with the task of negotiating between immediate resistance and long-term ecological consciousness to offer a more nuanced account of activism's literary possibilities.

4.3. Representations of interconnectedness

All four authors emphasize the interconnectedness of all living things but formulate this principle differently. Abbey's remains a regional focus: his deserts are landscapes of bare beauty, where the conditions for survival are toughness and respect. His formulation of interconnectedness in nature is based on sensory proximity and visible disrepair, what Urban Political Ecology would call the material contestation of urban power and ecological resistance (Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). In contrast, Powers weaves an invisible and global ecology of interconnectedness. Trees in *The Overstory* communicate, adapt, and support each other in networks similarly imitating human relationships. Powers takes cue from the latest scientific research into tree communication and forest wisdom (Wohlleben, 2016) to weave an emblematic as much as factual description of ecosystems as relational nets. This is the vision nearest to post-humanist imagination where boundaries between human and nonhuman life are ever-penetrating and fluid.

4.4. Awareness of limits and alternative readings

While both novels powerfully resist urban encroachment and underscore the call for environmental action, the more critical reading isolates tensions in their approaches. Abbey's appeal to sabotage has been criticized as glorifying violence and ignoring structural change (cf. Buell, 2005), whereas Powers' protagonists sometimes appear mired in philosophical debate, struggling to apply practical modes of resistance. Furthermore, both novels, as rich as they are, may be said to marginalize Indigenous ecological praxis or refuse sufficient engagement with race-based environmental injustice, a field that is growing within ecocriticism (Whyte, 2018). This absence is particularly significant given the emphasis of the study on forests as sacred, relational, and politically contested spaces. By centering two mainly white American narratives, the corpus runs the risk of reproducing those very epistemic limitations it critiques, thereby leaving Indigenous sovereignty, decolonial land stewardship, and minority environmental activism poorly represented within its analytical frame.

Taking this as a limitation, the analysis foregrounds the gap itself as a methodological concern: in what ways do the novels' narrative structures, their character perspective, and their ecological imaginaries implicitly reveal the constraints of settler-oriented environmental discourse? Through this, the present study recognizes that its



discoveries surface in a partial literary landscape and positions this partiality as an invitation towards an enriched framing in future research by incorporating Indigenous ecological epistemologies and environmental justice traditions. By stating forthrightly what is not present, the methodology respects critical integrity while also placing the Abbey and Powers readings within a broader and more ecologically attentive critical perspective.

5. The Consequences of ignoring ecological interconnectedness: comparison of Abbey and Powers' positions

Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* portray nature as sacred and interdependent, challenging readers to rethink humanity's relationship with the nonhuman world. While Abbey's voice is direct and almost aggressive, and Powers' voice is more abstract and expansive, both works articulate a shared ethical imperative: the protection of ecosystems against the pressures of urbanization and industrial expansion. Through the Urban Political Ecology lens, these texts illuminate how politics, economy, and urbanization transform ecological systems and render non-human nature invisible.

Abbey's work is deeply rooted in the American Southwest, with the desert functioning as both a physical and spiritual battleground. Abbey's characters rally together to protect this rugged but very much "alive" land from industrial desecration. Hayduke emphatically writes, "I love the land too much to see it turned into a wasteland by people who don't give a damn" (E. Abbey, 1975, p. 168). Abbey presents activism as immediate and confrontational; nature is framed as a "holy domain" that demands resolute defense. Such rhetoric is further embedded in descriptions of the bulldozer and dam construction interruptions, in which the bulldozer represents the force of urban and industrial culture being imposed on the desert landscape. The characterization of Hayduke in Abbey's work as a radical guerrilla fighter supports the exploration of resistance in relation to ecological dispossession

Powers' work, by contrast, centers on the forest as an integrated global system in which trees, plants, animals, and humans are biologically and communicatively intertwined. *The Overstory* depicts characters who come to understand forests as embodiments of planetary interdependence rather than isolated landscapes. Trees function as "communication networks" that share nutrients and information, symbolizing unity across species. The activist role within *The Overstory* is thus reflective and scientifically informed. As Patricia Westerford states, "The most marvelous creations of four billion years of life need assistance" (R. Powers, 2018, p. 460). This is characteristic of Powers' style: characterization grows out of ecological knowledge, and activism stems from an awareness of invisible systems being disrupted by city-building and capitalist expansion.

While Abbey emphasizes immediate, local threats to nature (bulldozers, dams, and the encroachment of urban sprawl) Powers emphasizes broader, global ecological deterioration. Abbey's characters confront environmental destruction as a daily and tangible assault, whereas Powers draws attention to ecological networks that "are being irreversibly transformed by human activity." Here, with Urban Political Ecology, this contrast brings into focus two different scales of nature-culture struggles:

Abbey announces a localized resistance against infrastructural violence in nature, and Powers critiques a more dispersed and systemic pressure in nature/culture, in the form of consumption practices in cities, resource economies, and governance.

Both novels criticize the ecological costs of urbanization. In *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, urban sprawl emerges as a concrete enemy that necessitates “direct, revolutionary action,” with sabotage functioning as a literary metaphor for reclaiming ecological agency. In *The Overstory*, urbanization appears as a planetary problem requiring structural and ethical transformation rather than isolated acts of resistance. Urban Political Ecology therefore is an important tool in the analysis of how each novel relates degradation of nature to political and economic structures which are more invested in the expansion of cities than in sustainability. Together, Abbey and Powers present forests and deserts as threatened ecosystems and insist upon moral accountability. Abbey’s Chapter 9 offers a radical, confrontational response strategy, while *The Overstory* proposes ecological awareness as a form of meditation and collective responsibility. Both works offer compelling literary critiques of urbanization and underscore the urgency of preserving nature through ethically informed action.

6. The consequences of ignoring ecological interconnectedness: Comparing Abbey and Powers on nature as sacred and interconnected

Nature is portrayed as sacred and interconnected in both Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* and Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang*; both novels critique urbanization and industrial expansion. While each work defends the environment, their differing visions of ecological interdependence produce distinct representations of forest resilience and environmental activism. Using an Urban Political Ecology perspective, these differences can be interpreted as a contrast between literary responses to power, development, and expansion in restructuring nature-human relations.

Set in the American Southwest, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* follows George Hayduke and fellow guerrilla activists who sabotage construction projects to save the desert, land Abbey presents as sacred and essential to human survival. As Hayduke declares, “Sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul” (E. Abbey, 1975, p. 305), capturing the urgency and militancy of Abbey’s ecologism. This is a direct motivation of Hayduke’s bridge destruction and machine-smashing, these moments when Abbey symbolically casts industrialism or this city-centered political power with which Abbey symbolically invests all things industrial. By contrast, *The Overstory* abandons a single regional focus to depict forests as vast, communicating systems. Characters such as Patricia Westerford understand trees as “communication networks,” sharing resources and information across ecosystems. Powers stresses that landscapes often perceived as separate (forests, cities, and human communities) are linked within one “invisible, living web.” Such a metaphor is evident throughout this novel. It cultivates characterization through an understanding of how lives are placed inside, rather than at the forefront of, ecological systems.

Abbey’s activism is place-based and confrontational: his heroes defend a threatened landscape through direct, sometimes violent resistance rooted in deep ecology

and bioregional loyalty. Environmental degradation in desert environments highlights imbalances in relationships between local biomes and state-led development projects, an important focus of Urban Political Ecology. In contrast, Powers presents reflective, science-informed activism grounded in global ecological ethics. “The trees are talking to one another,” notes Westerford (R. Powers, 2018, p. 144), emphasizing moral responsibility to the entire biosphere. While Abbey focuses on immediate threats (bulldozers, dams, and roads) Powers situates environmental crisis within long-term systemic disruption. Abbey frames urbanization as a direct assault on discrete ecosystems; Powers portrays it as a planetary challenge shaped by centuries of anthropocentrism and environmental neglect. These opposing narrative scales illustrate how each of these authors incorporates an ecological critique into a contrastive political imaginary.

Both authors critique the political and economic forces driving urban growth. Instead of viewing urbanization in a very objective manner, both novels view it from a perspective in which this phenomenon is a consequence of imbalanced power relations in which priority is given to economic expansion rather than ecological continuity. Urban Political Ecology clarifies this critique by revealing how development reflects structural power rather than individual choice. Empirical studies reinforce their concerns: U.S. urban sprawl destroyed over 17 million acres of forest between 2000 and 2020 (Nowak & Greenfield, 2018), echoing the environmental catastrophes portrayed in their fiction. Ultimately, Abbey calls for immediate, extreme action, while Powers advances a long-term vision of systemic transformation. Together, their novels urge readers to reconsider humanity’s responsibilities toward the planet’s “holy, life-giving systems” and demonstrate how literature can make visible the power relations that structure urbanization and ecological resilience. Below is a composite, consolidated table presenting one final comparative matrix that plots the interpretive codes, thematic elements, and authorial contributions of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *The Overstory*. This structure permits a side-by-side, in-depth exploration of how each novel addresses forest resilience, urbanization, and environmental activism:

Analytical category	Edward Abbey’s <i>The Monkey Wrench Gang</i>	Richard Powers’ <i>The Overstory</i>
Narrative style	Satirical, confrontational, episodic	Multi-voiced, lyrical, philosophical
Theoretical lens	Deep ecology, biocentrism, individualism	Ecofeminism, post-humanism, planetary
Setting and ecosystems	Desert Southwest, local biomes	Global forests, biodiversity hotspot ecology
Forest resilience	Achieved through militant resistance to development	Rooted in multispecies solidarity and memory
Activism strategies	Radical direct action (eco-sabotage)	Reflective direct action, philosophical mourning
Civil disobedience	Story-driven sabotage and rebellion	Scientific testimony and communal awareness

Disconnection from nature	Externalized through anger, nostalgia, and sabotage	Internalized through alienation, introspection, and transformation
Urbanization metaphor	Desert reframed as a "parking lot," symbolizing destruction	Cities as spaces of dualistic thinking and ecological forgetting
Epistemological framing	Nature as holy, spiritual heritage	Nature as intricate, interconnected intelligence
Narrative arc	Conflict-led resistance	Loss of interconnectedness and gradual reawakening
View of cities	Inherently corrupting and destructive	Spaces of alienation but potential for ecological reconnection
Critique of urbanization	Physical confrontation with infrastructure	Symbolic critique of global consumer capitalism
View of interconnectedness	Sacred wilderness with visible interdependence	Networked ecosystem with invisible interconnections

Source: Recapitulation from the above sectional analysis

The above table combines thematic codes and theoretical frameworks in a manner that illustrates how Abbey's and Powers' novels build urbanization tensions, ecological disconnection, and activism tensions differently while sharing forest resilience and environmental ethics concerns in common.

Conclusion

This study has examined the resilience of forests under increasing urbanization in the literary contexts of Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, unveiling the intricacy of challenges and opportunities of environmental activism in contemporary America. Though they share divergent narrative approaches and ideological models, both novels emphasize the pivotal intersections between human civilization and nature, alerting us to the need for ecological awareness and action in an era of swift urban and industrial growth.

Abbey's novel promotes a vision of radical environmentalism based on direct action, depicting a grassroots movement prepared to sabotage infrastructure to protect wild landscapes. His heroes are driven by a deep moral conviction that nature has intrinsic value, a perspective in line with deep ecology and early environmental resistance movements. In this case, the forest is used as a symbol of resistance and a symbol of strength against the homogenizing force of urbanization. The novel calls for a reawakening of individual responsibility and confrontation, even if it means through controversial means.

On the other hand, Powers' *The Overstory* provides a more internal, web-like, and systemic account of ecological resilience. With its layered narrative structure and ensemble cast, the novel positions forests not as static backgrounds but as dynamic, living participants within an interspecies ecological web. This perspective aligns with



contemporary posthumanist and ecofeminist models of thought that are critical of anthropocentrism and offer a broader view of the agency of nature (Alaimo, 2016; Oppermann, 2020). Powers' position is that resilience rightly understood is not necessarily about resistance but about a universal recognition of ecological interdependence, in which human existence is not separate from non-human existence.

The Monkey Wrench Gang and *The Overstory* offer contrasting, complementary visions of forest resilience in the age of rapid urbanization. Edward Abbey's novel promotes militant, individualistic resistance rooted in 1970s countercultural environmentalism, while Richard Powers emphasizes collective, scientific, and ethical responses to ecological awareness. Both novels dissolve anthropocentric assumptions through their depiction of forests as active agents of ecological and cultural resilience. Their juxtaposition highlights generational transformation in American nature writing, from past biocentric activism to newer post-humanist and ecofeminist theory in seeking more sustainable human-nature relations.

The project presents a new literary ecocriticism framework but acknowledges some constraints. It focuses on just two U.S.-centered novels and excludes Indigenous, non-Western, and global South literatures that have the potential to further deepen the understanding of ecological justice and resistance. The close reading and thematic coding of the methodology can be expanded in future research through reader reception theory or the integration of environmental data. Though the research overlaps with important ecocritical and environmental humanities theory, it could have been enriched by greater exchange with urban political ecology, climate fiction, and environmental justice studies. The book remains solidly grounded, however, showing how fiction continues to be essential in charting visions of ecological futures in a world that is increasingly urban.

Lastly, Abbey and Powers compel us to see the role of forests not as commodities to be preserved, but as interlocutors in a moral compact involving humility, reciprocity, and continued activism. Forest resilience, as we see in these paintings, is not just an ecological one but a moral imperative that asks us to rethink the way we approach urbanization, environmental protection, and the interdependence of all life. With cities expanding further and further and natural systems facing more unprecedented pressure, literature becomes both a mirror and a map: a reflection of the price of inaction and a map to new environmental consciousness. The pressing question that remains is how we, as citizens, researchers, and policymakers, can foster such awareness and direct it into effective, inclusive, and sustainable transformation.

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