

The Image of Sandhill Cranes and Identity Crisis in the Echo Maker

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Abstract: Richard Powers has established himself as one of the most well-known and representative writers in the postmodern literary world with his deployment of the arts and the sciences to such an extent. *The Echo Maker*, as his most successful work was titled as the Nation Book Award for Fiction of 2006. Sandhill cranes possess a lot a space in *The Echo Maker*; at the very beginning of the novel, Powers describes as the witnesses of Mark's accident and insert them everywhere in the novel. In this sense, nature's spirituality embodied in sandhill cranes' serves as remarkable contrast to human society's paucity of spirituality. Powers uses sandhill cranes as a metaphor for the identification of human beings and tries to call back the human race from jeopardy through the echoes of sandhill cranes. Given that, in the novel, sandhill cranes serve as a sharp contrast with the self-disintegrated humans such as characters in the novel. They inspire us with their eternal spirituality, their vitality and resilience and their intensive reverence toward nature and life.

Keywords: *The Echo Maker*; sandhill cranes; identity crisis

1. Introduction

As the National Book Award for Fiction of 2006 and the masterpiece of Richard Powers, *The Echo Maker* has gained a great variety of positive feedbacks from reviewers since its republication. This novel tells a mysterious story about the condition of the brain in our contemporary world. On a winter night on a remote Nebraska road, twenty-seven-year-old Mark Schluter's truck flips over and brings him to a near-fatal accident. His older sister, Karin, returns reluctantly to their hometown to look after Mark, accompany and attend to charm away the traumatic head injury of her brother. But when he regains consciousness from a protracted exanimation, Mark believes that this woman—who looks, acts, and sounds just like his sister—is really an impostor. Shocked and shattered by her brother's refusal to recognize her, Karin contacts the cognitive neurologist Gerald Weber, famous for his case histories describing brain disorders. Weber recognized Mark's condition as a rare case of Capgras syndrome—the delusion that people in one's life are doubles or impostors—and eagerly investigates. What he discovers in Mark slowly undermines even his own sense of being. Meanwhile, Mark, armed only with a note left by an anonymous witness, attempts to learn what happened the night of his inexplicable accident. Besides the main line of Mark's convalescence, the whole story is structured against the annual migration of sandhill cranes, "the echo maker" in mythology.

2. The image of Sandhill cranes

Sandhill cranes possess a lot a space in *The Echo Maker*, at the very beginning of the novel, Powers describes as the witnesses of Mark's accident and insert them everywhere in the novel. "Lasts forever: no change to measure." That's how Powers defines them.

Cranes keep landing as night falls. Ribbons of them roll down, slack against the sky. They float in from all compass point, in kettles of a dozen, dropping with the dusk. Scores of the *Grus* candidates settle on their wings, trumpeting: the advance wave of a mass evacuation. More birds land by the minute, the air red with calls."

The image of these ancient and migratory birds has the strength of enduing the novel linking all the living things. They arrive by the thousands in winter near Kearney on their road south from the Arctic, dancing their age-old steps. However, the humans who have found their way to Kearney aren't so certain about their existence. Their identities shift, change and disappear as self-doubt and confusion

break down their past. Powers uses the annual migration of the sandhill crane as his central metaphor. Evolutionary throwbacks that have been congregating in vast flocks on the lands of Nebraska for five million years or more, they have no such burden of consciousness, acting only on ancient memory, performing basic cycles of birth and rebirth that humans forget at their peril.

Given that, sandhill cranes are characterized as a symbol of timelessness in nature. This is primarily epitomized in the enormous vitality of this species. As “the oldest flying things on the earth, one stutter-step away from pterodactyls”, sandhill cranes have survived the merciless mechanism of evolution and weathered natural or man-made catastrophes. Actually, their strong resilience is originated in their exceptional solidarity, which finds its manifestation in their annual migration. As the title labeled them: “The Echo Maker”, for their sonorous calls and their migratory journey. Sandhill cranes fly to their ultimate destination in a self-forming formation, “They shed the solitary need. They feed with others, roosting together at night... One day they lift up and join a self-forming V. They lose themselves in the moving strand. Stands converge in kettles, kettles merge in sheets.” It is their strong unity that infuses incredible vigor into their echoes, to some extent, sandhill cranes’ resonant echoes serve as a metaphor of nature’s eternity. This perpetuity has been achieved in cranes’ reverence toward life and nature which specified in their veneration toward death, embodied in their resounding echoes. As Powers pictures, “The cranes dance, weirdly deliberate. It tosses twigs into the air... flaring up here and there in tentative bursts of ballet” Their graceful dance fills nature with vibrancy. (*Burn Stephen.2008*)^[1] Moreover, nature’s vitality is also manifested in their endless echoes. Sandhill cranes hovering over the sky fill the air and the clouds with tributaries. Flying flocks of cranes form “a river of birds, a mirror Platte meandering through heaven. And every part of it, calling”. Hence, sandhill cranes’ echo serves as a kind language of nature, but incomprehensible to humans. The word “echo” itself signifies bilateral communication and a mutual emotional response. As described in the novel, sandhill cranes’ echoes “alternate, then synchronize, looping their calls into unison” A kind of “trivial telepathy” could be located in their echoes, however inaccessible to humans and their scientific explanation.

As for the routines of sandhill cranes’ migrations, Powers refer to the cranes’ rituals and their memory of the preserved paths of their ancestors. The routes are a tradition that has been kept as if it was a spiritual heritage handed down from generation to generation. “Something in the birds retraces a route laid down centuries before their parents showed in to them. And each crane recalls the route still to come.” This ability of “recall” the future is aspect of religion which is fulfilled by the selves are a burden on their own to be carried. As in the case with humans, the memory of the routes helps birds out of the cage of this self. For “In the evenings, they glide to the surface and roost in shallow, open waters remembered from previous years. They sail in over harvested fields, feathered dinosaurs bugling, a last great reminder of life before the self”. Remembering the commonality they had with biological ancestors, the cranes experience identity border crossing. Karin extends this commonality with other species to humans when she realizes that humans also have lost their emotional memory by denying the bonds with the cranes. She thinks to herself that the whole human race “suffered from Capgras. Those birds danced like our next of kin, looked like our next of kin, called and willed and parented and taught and navigated all just like our blood relations. Half their parts were still ours. Yet humans waved them off: impostors”.

One of the conflicts in the novel is the protector of the cranes and greedy developer. Sandhill cranes here are not only threatened species damaged by human being, they are also a symbol for the salvation for human race.

“But... what is the operation trying to accomplish?”

“They’re trying to save the species.”

“Which species?”

The question surprises Mark. “Which species?” Shock give way to that booming, hollowed-out laugh. “That’s a good one. Which species?” He falls silent, deciding.

This conversation between Weber and Mark clearly states the intention of the sandhill cranes: a symbolization of the self-redemption of human beings. Powers uses sandhill cranes as a metaphor for the spirituality of human beings and tries to call back the human race from jeopardy through the echoes of sandhill cranes. Given that, in the novel, sandhill cranes serve as a sharp contrast with the self-disintegrated humans such as characters in the novel. They inspire us with their eternal spirituality, their vitality and resilience and their intensive reverence toward nature and life. (*Harris, Charles.2009*)^[2]

3. The identity crisis in the novel

3.1 Theoretical analysis of identity crisis

Theorist Erik Erikson coined the term identity crisis and believed that it was one of the most important conflicts people face in development. Its conceptive meaning is the failure to achieve ego identity during adolescence. According to Erikson, an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. Erikson's interest in identity began in childhood. Raised Jewish, Erikson appeared very Scandinavian and often felt that he was an outsider of both groups. His later studies of cultural life among the Yurok of northern California and the Sioux of South Dakota helped formalize Erikson's ideas about identity development and identity crisis. Erikson stated that it was really important to somehow acquire a strong sense of self at a critical point during adolescence to make your adult life less anxiety prone. He believed that if you had a strong identity, then you'd be less likely to suffer from potentially disabling psychological and even physical problems that are common in adult life.

Erikson's psychosocial theory is widely and highly regarded. As with any concept there are critics, but generally Erikson's theory is considered fundamentally significant. Erikson was a psychoanalyst and also a humanitarian. So his theory is useful far beyond psychoanalysis – it's useful for any application involving personal awareness and development - of oneself or others. Erikson's theory refers to "psychosocial crisis". This term is an extension of Sigmund Freud's use of the word "crisis", which represents internal emotional conflict. It might also be described as an internal struggle or challenge which a person must negotiate and deal with in order to grow and develop. Erikson described identity as "a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unself-conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. (Potkalitsky Nicolas. 2010)^[3] In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given--that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals--with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters."

Psychologists believe that identity achievement can only occur after a person has actively explored a wide variety of options available to him. In other words, a person must undergo an identity crisis in order to reach identity achievement. For instance, a person who is in identity achievement with regard to occupation would have first tried out various career routes via internships, online research, and informational interviews before identifying the best fit. Identity crisis is formed because a person may not have a good idea of who he or she is. So it's literally what it sounds like: a crisis of your identity or sense of self. Some people seem to acquire a very strong sense of self during adolescence, while other people, even through adult life, never quite manage to get that strong sense of self and they're not really aware of how they're perceived by other people.

In Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, the emergence of an identity crisis occurs during the time in which people struggle between feelings of identity versus role confusion. Researcher James Marcia has expanded upon Erikson's initial theory. According to Marcia and his colleagues, the balance between identity and confusion lies in making a commitment to an identity. Marcia also developed an interview method to measure identity as well as four different identity statuses. This method looks at three different areas of functioning: occupational role, beliefs and values and sexuality. The four identity statuses are built from high and low positions on two identity dimensions. Dimension one is "commitment." People high on commitment have a firm sense of who they are and feel strongly about the choices they have made. People low in identity commitment have an uncertain sense of self. Dimension two is "exploration." (Herman Luc and Bart Vervaeck. 2009)^[4] If you are high on the exploration dimension, you are actively questioning your sense of self and looking for ways to come to a decision.

According to Marcia the concept of identity really slides into three areas: the first one is how you feel about yourself, how you see yourself. The second one, the second world we all inhabit is people who you are closest to, people who you believe have a strong sense of who you are, the collective feedback that you've got from them through your lifetime. So that's that second world of identity. The third one is what is said behind our backs, a world we that we rarely come into contact with.

In *The Echo Maker*, Powers describes the essence of uncertain in our world including Mark's accident, Karin's confusion, Barbara's suicide attempt. Etc. In these uncertain times, it is an imperative

consideration because, when things are seemingly out of control and the center has been lost, when we find ourselves having to give up the people and things that we love for a time or forever, there is a place within ourselves to which we must return. In that point, the sentence at the very beginning of the novel, "To find the soul it is necessary to lose it" states the intention of Powers: that we must be through identity crisis can we get to our self-identification.

In today's rapidly changing world, identity crises are more common than in Erikson's day. Exploring different aspects of aspects self in the different areas of life, including our role at work, within the family, and in romantic relationships, can help strengthen our personal identities.

3.2 *The identity crisis of human beings*

In *The Echo Maker*, Powers brings us to deeper and wider range of view by dropping a hint that all human kind are suffering from Capgras syndrome. This hint has encouraged many reviewers to state the theme of ecological consciousness of this novel. Actually, it's quite partial to analyze the whole novel into an ecological writing, hence the Capgras syndrome that human being suffer from is not only failing to recognize the "blood relations" between human and nature, but also the identity crisis of the whole human kind. In that point, Capgras Syndrome turns out to be a metaphor for human's misidentification of the natural world and for a denial of self-identification in the human society—a identity crisis the entire human society is suffering from. The entire significance is featured in the sudden enlightenment of Karin Schluter.

A wave moved through her, a thought on a scale she'd never felt. No one has a clue what our brains were after, or how they meant to get it. If we could detach for a moment... For an instant, as the hearing turned into instinctive ritual, it hit her; the whole race suffered from Capgras. Those birds danced like our next of kin, looked like our next of kin, called and willed and parented and taught and navigated all just like our blood relations. Half their parts were still ours. Yet, humans waved them off: imposters. (*Diao Keli. 2007*)^[5]

It is a state asserts that all human beings are suffering Capgras syndrome just like Mark. Whereas Mark cannot recognize his sister or dog, we cannot recognize our kinship with any species but our own and even toward our own, we do not identify strongly enough to behave as kin to the nature. Powers presents here that the nature is identical with human beings, just like "our next of kin" and "blood relations". On the one hand, he indicates that human beings are seeking for prosperity and flourishing in spite of huge damage shall fall upon nature, they can't recognize the bond relations between human being and natures. It's just like Mark's disability of failing recognizes his sister and keeps seeking for his "real sister". The human race is also blinded by their conceit and arrogant, as Powers pictures, "baby wolf spiders, scattering off the back of their mother sound. Every curved line in the world is saying. Branches tapping the glass. Tracks in the snow". Nevertheless, it is humans' self-presumption that deafens them to the diverse sounds and music in nature and accordingly contributes to their refusal to identify the similarities between them and other creatures.

On the other hand, human beings dislocated themselves as the lord of creation, so an economic sense dominated the human society; this profit-oriented sense blinds them to see their position before nature and accordingly contributes to their refusal to identify themselves. Thus making human beings consider the nature as their tools and property, which can be exploited and destroyed as they wish. The plan of Karsh is a perfect annotation of this sense. This sophisticated real estate developer grants a top priority to the cost and revenue. He attempts to take advantages of the fabulous spectacle of sandhill alongside the Platte River to maximize his benefits. So does the town, Kearney. Which indicates human beings are incapable of arousing affective responses to other species in nature, only to "waved them off" by labeling them "impostors". (*Xue Yufeng. 2006*)^[6] This mode of thinking allows for a statistically unimportant loss of life, for that kind of loss can be acceptable as long as it is converted into monetary terms. Hence, nature in human's Capgras syndrome have been unjustifiably over-unified and over-simplified through a method of numeralization, where the value of nature is underestimated much grievously than its true worth. In the novel, the tourist economy aims at taking advantage of cranes' annual migration, develops crane-watching activities and a great number of hotels such as the MotoRest are being constructed to welcome crane peepers from tickets for crane peeping as well as from hotel lodging. "We're crowding them into one of the greatest spectacles going. That's why crane tourism has exploded. Big business now, and every spring we use even more water. So the show will be even more spectacular next year." Just as Daniel Riegel the protector sympathizes, in the eyes of developer and even the people in Kearney, sandhill cranes, a symbol of nature, has been recognized as estate to satisfy the desire of prosperity of human beings.

To humans, not only sandhill cranes' echoes are incomprehensible but also their mutual affection is inaccessible. Nevertheless, it is this irremovable kind of affection that endows nature with spirituality. Indeed, sandhill cranes do have love, a kind of love even more noble and respectable than a romantic love. It is a kind mutual affection well demonstrated in their spirit of self-sacrifice. Which is indeed deeply rooted in their intensive love for their descendents---a kind of extension of their life. Maybe they might have no selves as Weber contends, but it is their selflessness that endows their descendants with an opportunity to survive. (*Chen Shidan.. 2002*)^[7] To some extent, this parental self-sacrifice is rewarding, for their surviving descendants would engrave it into their bones and brains and integrate it into their deafening echoes to hold themselves up in confrontation with dangers and even with catastrophes. Unfortunately, this spirit of self-identification is obsolete for humans, partly or possibly because of their strong sense of "self". In this sense, nature's spirituality embodied in sandhill cranes' serves as remarkable contrast to human society' paucity of spirituality.

4. Conclusion

Richard Powers uses Capgras syndrome as a metaphor for the identity crisis in individuals and the human race. With his reflection on the meaning of human existence and the identification of cultural identity, Powers applies sandhill image to illustrate a cognitive chaos that all human beings are suffering from. The identity crisis Powers depicts can raise a profound doubt about the stability and reliability of self-identification, while suggesting that Capgras and the like are not just pathological exceptions but resemble transient conditions inside baseline consciousness. And that fact can open us to one another. Only in self-uncertainty can we make a little step for our self-identification. As the novel develops, it is clear to see that to obtain one's identification, it's necessary to go through the identity crisis. From misidentification to self-perception, we can change from "No One" and then "Bring back someone else".

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