

“LIFE, UH, FINDS A WAY”: THE ARTIST’S VOICE IN *THE OVERSTORY* AS
HUMANITY’S KEY TO SURVIVAL IN A WORLD THAT BELONGS TO THE TREES AND
NATURE’S PRESENCE IN APOCALYPTIC HORROR

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Though the term “ecocriticism” was essentially coined by William Ruckert in 1978, ecological concern in writing is seen dating as far back as the seventeenth century with William Shakespeare and his concerns about deforestation. Ecocritical approaches to Nature writing have more popularly been linked back to the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists and Kantian philosophers seeking to define humanity’s purpose in time and space. As concerns for the environment continued to grow into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, different fields of ecocritical studies began taking root within academia, but still seemed to have little impact on societal change. While essays grounded in scientific concern are continuing to become buried within the constraints of academia, artistic works have begun taking environmental concerns beyond the academic world and have prompted a new generation of ecocritical action. In his novel *The Overstory*, Richard Powers combines the non-fiction realities of contemporary society and the fictional realities of his characters to make an important statement about the artist’s role in mediating a harmonious connection between humankind and nature that will allow for the preservation of human life in a world that belongs to the trees, which can further be used to understand the ecocritical statements being made in apocalyptic horror films such as M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Happening* (2008), Garreth Edwards’ *Godzilla* (2014), and even Steven Spielberg’s *Jurrassic Park* (1993).

Convergences
New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

Before understanding the ways in which artistic endeavor has begun taking environmental concerns beyond the walls of academia, it is important to understand where environmental awareness began taking root and why it seems never to have expanded into effective action. Contemporary scholars such as Rob Nixon have credited society's aversity to environmental concern to the lack of public accessibility across different cultures and nations. In addition to accessibility, Nixon suggests that there is a linguistic barrier between academic writing and common speech that hinders the effectiveness of ecocritical calls to action: "Ours is an age in which the combined wealth of the world's 550 billionaires exceeds that of the 3 billion humans who constitute the planet's poorest 50 percent . . . The isolation of post-colonial literary studies from environmental concerns has limited the field's intellectual reach" (247).

Contemporary society, much like society from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, has isolated environmental texts and ideas from those countries not considered part of the English canon, which has limited intellectual studies, as well as public awareness on the extent of environmental issues. As Nixon points out, much of the intellectual reach of environmental scholarship has remained confined within the walls of academia and the upper class due to linguistic barriers and accessibility. According to Nixon, literature departments are crucial to spreading environmental awareness: "Literature departments are likely to remain influential players in the greening of the humanities" (248). While essays and non-fiction accounts of humanity's impact on the environment are significant in promoting environmental awareness, it could be argued that literature and art hold the keys to breaking linguistic barriers and encouraging environmental activism.

According to several ecocritical scholars, ecocriticism began taking root in the nineteenth century with Transcendental Nature writing and Kantian philosophy that explored the link

Convergences
New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

between human progress and morality. David Mazel claims that while environmental literary studies developed as an academic field in the 1980's, ecocriticism had been around for decades as a part of more general discourses of nature writing: "In the United States a recognizable ecocriticism first arose in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as criticism in general was beginning to undergo major changes . . . dominated by 'men of letters'" (3). The nineteenth century American Transcendentalists, or the 'men of letters,' are recognized for their ecocritical efforts, in which they combined Nature writing and Kantian philosophies of ambition and morality to reflect on humanity's place within both the natural and supernatural worlds. While the American Transcendentalists are often credited for their efforts in early ecocriticism as they focused on the dichotomy between the American Pastoral and the Industrial Revolution, many of their philosophical ideas are rooted in the philosophy Thomas Carlyle popularized in his criticism of the nineteenth century as an "Age of Machinery" (34). In his influential essay "Signs of the Times" (1829), Thomas Carlyle defines the age with a sense of environmental awareness seen across contemporary ecocritical compositions:

It is an Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practices the great art of adapting means to an ends . . . This deep paralyzed subjection to physical objects comes not from Nature, but from our own unwise mode of *viewing* Nature. (34, 48).

Humankind is driven by progress, and individuals are unable to see how their subjection to the physicality of the industrial world has separated them from natural truths as they have forgotten how to live with Nature; instead, individuals have begun to live beside nature by *viewing* it as an objectual representation of beauty. As Carlyle also demonstrates, the sentiment behind ecocriticism becomes lost in academic linguistics.

Convergences
New: “Life, uh, finds a way”

Where some scholars suggest environmental awareness arose from the Transcendental philosophies of the nineteenth century, closer analysis of nineteenth-century texts suggests ecocriticism is linked to Romantic fiction. Scholars such as Leo Marx note Romantic writers combined pastoral idealizations and philosophies of the human condition to make a statement about humanity’s transgressions against nature in their need for progress: “The ideas and emotions linked to the fact of industrialization provide Hawthorne [and other Romantics] with just such an enlargement of meaning. Their function is like that of the secondary subject, or vehicle, of a grand metaphor” (29). Romantic writers such as Hawthorne not only wrote about the ways industrialization had begun changing humanity’s way of life, but also about how this change affected human nature and disrupted humanity’s connection with the natural world. In the same way Hawthorne could be seen making sense of pastoral idealizations and the industrial society through fiction, contemporary novelists can be seen making sense of ecocritical ideas put forth by modern essayists and environmental activists.

While many contemporary novelists making sense of ecocritical ideas seem to utilize post-apocalyptic dystopian fantasy as a way to express the severity of the relationship between human progress and the environment, Richard Powers locates nature’s voice in contemporary society with fictional characters who take on real-world events. Powers’ technique in locating the real in fiction is especially significant in his *The Overstory* as he makes an important ecocritical statement about the artist’s role in preserving human life in a world where activism and industrialism are subsumed by to the true nature of the earth. Gregory Day of the *Sydney Herald* notes *The Overstory*’s significance as an artwork that preserves art and projects the idea that art is the liminal space between the interactions of humanity and nature: “The Overstory. . . is that rare thing, a necessary book, and it reminds us that the novel, like the teeming earth it celebrates

Convergences
New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

and cries out for, is not now, nor ever will be, dead" (*Sydney Herald*). The novel will continue to celebrate and illuminate the cries of society; it will continue to act as a bridge for understanding between the human construction of self and the universe. Powers' novel, in particular, acts as a bridge for understanding humanity's connection to the natural world as Powers pulls from actual ecological research to produce a fictional mirror to contemporary society and project ecocritical ideas beyond the walls of academia.

Powers builds his novel from the ecological research posed by Dr. Suzanne Simard and forester Peter Wohlleben. According to an interview between Yale environmental scholar Diane Toomey and Simard, while researching her doctoral thesis, Simard discovered trees communicate their needs and send each other nutrients via a network of latticed fungi buried in the soil; since that time, Simard has pioneered further research into how trees converse, including how these fungal filigrees help trees send warning signals about environmental change, search for kin, and transfer their nutrients to neighboring plants before they die (*Yale*). Powers seems to utilize Simard's research as the foundation for his text as his novel is rooted in the ecological studies of his character Dr. Patricia Westerford. Westerford's research sets the premise behind the ancestral developments Powers creates between the trees and the people in his novel. Powers' trees become living characters in themselves as readers are led to see the lives of his human characters through the perception of the trees spanning throughout the novel. Powers uses art as a way to connect knowledge from unique disciplines to build an understanding of all living forces at work on earth, and as Kathryn Hume suggests: "Powers has an ability to connect different knowledges from separate disciplines such as Science and Philosophy, or Science and Art, throughout his works and this is effective in building our understanding of the complexities of the forces at work in our everyday lives" (2). With his ability to build his reader's

Convergences
New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

understandings of the complexities of the forces at work in the world, Powers is effectively able to create an ecocritical argument for environmental preservation.

One of the themes most significant to Powers' work reflects on art's ability to preserve history as Powers develops a compelling image with his text that mirrors the life of trees to the life of people. Powers builds his novel like a tree as he uses the tree's anatomy to create a mold with which to fill the lives of his characters. In his tree's "Roots," Powers introduces nine characters with nine separate stories, and focuses on their upbringing, and ancestral roots. As Powers moves on into creating the "Trunk" of his tree, his characters begin coming together to work for a cause and develop rich relationships. As his creation branches out into the "Crown" of the tree, Powers' characters branch out into their separate lives, though they are essentially still attached to the tree's trunk by fate. As Powers' tree sheds its "Seeds" the characters must each accept the fates handed to them, and this acceptance parallels the idea of accepting death as a natural part of life. In creating this mold and filling it with the lives of his characters, Powers essentially asserts the idea that the earth belongs to the trees and humanity is ancestrally linked to the tree's roots. Powers develops this link at the beginning of his novel: "Old trees are our parents, and our parents' parents, perchance. If you would learn the secrets of nature, you must practice more humanity. . ." (5). According to Powers, it is important for individuals to understand their roots in order to connect to their own human natures and eventually learn the secrets of nature. Death is the one secret of nature that Powers seems to reflect on most throughout his text, and while it is the one known fact in life, death also holds secrets about the structure of life itself; these are the secrets of nature Powers hopes to uncover for readers.

Death and rebirth are recurring themes throughout Powers' text as he addresses the human constructs of space and time. Moments in Powers' text speak to the transient notion of

Convergences
New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

human life in regard to the life of trees: "Say nothing, no matter what. Time is with us . . . But people have no idea what time is. They think it's a line, spinning out from three seconds behind them, then vanishing just as fast into the three seconds of fog just ahead" (358). Powers reflects on the idea that human life is not linear, and that *our* moment in time is like a dot on a continual cyclical force. The only sure thing in life is death, and death, along with the secrets it carries about life, is something that needs to be understood. According to Powers: "Dying is life too . . . we need to remember how to die" (464-5). Powers leads his readers to this conclusion through Nicholas Hoel, a character who has witnessed death and rebirth in the span of both human and non-human life. Further analysis of Nick's character and characterization as an artist suggests Nick comes to this conclusion through his understanding of art.

Nick's burying and unearthing of his artwork reharmonizes his connection with his ancestry, which he realizes is needed for individual growth. Art becomes a way to both preserve history and our own singular moments in time, and from art, new ideas can bloom. Additionally, as Powers shows with Nick's final masterpiece, art can teach individuals the secrets of nature. Powers concludes his novel with a reflection on the word "STILL" (502). The earth will *still* maintain its presence, its life cycles in the continuum of space and time, with or without humanity. Powers points out earlier in his text: "That's life; the dead keep the living alive" (423). Upon first read, it seems that Powers is making a statement about coping with death and suggesting that death becomes a nourishment for the living to keep on living. However, in reflecting on the apocalyptic movie trope and on Powers' concluding remarks, it could be understood that eventually human life will feed the earth. Powers' novel closes on Nick's final artistic achievement, the word "still" spelled out by old and soon-to-be decaying trees:

Convergences
New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

Already, this world is greening. Already, the mosses surge over, the beetles and lichen and fungi turning the logs to soil. Already seedlings root in the nurse logs' crevices, nourished by the rot . . . Two centuries more, and these five living letters too, will fade back into the swirling patterns . . . they'll spell out for a while, the word life has been saying, since the beginning" (502).

Life is born of decay. While the earth may continue to decay with human progress, there are still seedlings of life that will continue to find a way and when humanity becomes one with the earth in death, new life will spring from the nourished ground.

Perhaps, the most powerful ecocritical statement Power's makes with his text comes from this last image he leaves readers with at the end of his novel, which suggests nature will continue surviving with, or without, human life. The idea that humankind should "Do nothing," echoes throughout the pages of Power's novel and maintains the sentiment behind Dr. Westerford's important environmental studies: "The best and easiest way to get a forest to return to any plot of cleared land is to do nothing—nothing at all, and do it for less time than you might think" (460). Human agency on the natural world becomes an insignificant strain of action when nature's forces outweigh the integrity and lifespan of humankind. Westerfield begins grappling with this idea as she struggles with the title of her book, *How Trees Will Save the World*, when Dennis asks why she believes trees will not save the world: "What use are we, to trees? . . . Trees won't save the world? . . . I'm sure they will. After the world shrugs off" (223). Trees may save the world but will only save it once the world constructed by humankind has died off. Once human kind can literally "do nothing" (460), trees will have the opportunity to reclaim their world.

The same thoughts that both haunt and offer hope for Westerfield, find Nick in his dreams as the trees laugh at him and the naivety of the human condition: "*Save us? What a*

Convergences
New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

human thing to do. Even the laugh takes years" (329). When human existence has been wiped clean from the earth and the trees have reclaimed their territory, it is implied that the old trees will look back at the times humanity attempted to save them and laugh at their fruitless ambition to save themselves. The haunting laugh left by the trees in Nick's dream points to a theme most often found in science-fiction and apocalyptic horror, which suggests if human kind cannot learn to live in harmony with nature, nature will be victorious in the end. Andrew Smith and William Hughes coin the term "ecogothic" in the first journal for ecogothic criticism (2013), in which they locate a belated presence of ecological awareness in criticisms of the Romantic Gothic: "In most of these novels, the desecration of the natural world is met with psychological trauma and can usually be traced to an oppressive ruling power. . . As the attack on nature progresses in these novels, the environments become more frightening" (5-6). Smith and Hughes point out that Romantic authors not only delve into the dark consciousness of the human psyche, but also identify the ways in which the human psyche can pit humankind against the natural world, even if they think they are doing something beneficial for the human race. As concluded most famously in novels such as Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), humankind's monomaniacal attempt to tame nature inevitably ends with nature being victorious in the end as the human characters ultimately commit suicide by ambitiously attempting to control their fates and claim power over natural life.

If the laugh that takes years in Nick's dream does, in fact, come from the ancient trees who have lived long past human life, and if they are poking fun at the way human ambition to save the earth and improve human life has actually killed the human race, then the trees have essentially witnessed a slow mass suicide and this effectively encompasses an ecogothic theme found not only in Gothic fiction, but also in contemporary apocalyptic horror. While this concept

Convergences
New: “Life, uh, finds a way”

can be seen in many contemporary novels and movies where scientific ambition results in mass extinction and post-apocalyptic narratives, M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Happening* offers an unequivocal ecogothic mirror with which to view Powers’ narrative. Shyamalan’s movie offers viewers a fast-forwarded narrative of Powers’ philosophical glimpse into a future world, free of human agency and re-inhabited by endless supplies of vegetation. Where Powers hints at the idea of nature’s ability to adapt and survive despite of humanity’s slow suicide, Shyamalan shows nature surviving when threatened by too much human progress and the brevity of humanity’s self-endorsed extinction.

Where Powers’ artistic work endorses ecological awareness as it is presently happening in our contemporary society to alter the mindset of readers about these issues, Shyamalan takes his art to the horrific level and uses fear to alter the mindset of viewers through reflections of what could be, and of what is essentially slowly happening in terms of our relationship to the environment. As with Powers, it has been speculated that Shyamalan’s environmental efforts led him across the studies of Suzanne Simard and Peter Wohlleben, which may account for the premise of Shyamalan’s film. When threatened by a surplus of human abuse, the plants in Shyamalan’s film essentially communicate with one another to emit chemicals that cause mass suicide. In a TED talk video Suzanne Simard discusses the ways in which trees talk to each other and make calculations about the world around them: “[Trees] are the visible manifestations of ‘this other world’ underground, a world of infinite biological pathways that connect trees and allow them to communicate, and allow the forest to behave as if it’s a single organism. It might remind you of a sort of intelligence” (OpenCulture). Trees are intelligent organisms and while they may not be plotting their revenge on humanity, they are learning to adapt to their changing environments.

Convergences
New: “Life, uh, finds a way”

Closer analysis of Shyamalan’s film in light of Powers’ novel suggests that the trees are not intentionally seeking revenge on the human race for their ongoing destruction of the natural world but are fighting back against their own possible extermination as they begin a game of the survival of the fittest. The trees in Shyamalan’s film sense an apocalyptic danger to their species and begin emitting chemicals as a way to speak with each other and ward off predators—which, in an environmental sense, are human beings. According to Peter Wohlleben, scent is the primary communication method for trees and this stems from the way acacia trees communicate crisis by giving off a warning gas that signals to neighboring trees to pump toxins into their leaves and prepare themselves for the danger of being eaten (7). Similar processes take place with trees in our local environments. Wohlleben addresses the ways in which trees such as beeches, spruce, and oaks produce different scent compounds that can help trees relay environmental dangers that are affecting their structure: “If [a tree’s] roots find themselves in trouble, this information is broadcast throughout the tree, which can trigger the leaves to release scent compounds. . . they disperse quickly in the air. Often, they can be detected within a range of about 100 yards” (8-9). While scent is not the only way trees communicate, as they may also communicate through electrical signals transmitted by nerve impulses in their roots, according to Wohlleben, it is the quickest way for trees to warn others close by of impending danger.

If trees communicate by emitting scent to ward off predatory insects and a multitude of trees begin emitting the same scent, it could be suggested that the communal scent would extend over 100 yards. Additionally, as Shyamalan presents in his film, if trees were to encounter a bigger threat, they might, hypothetically, produce a more potent toxin that has a wider reach. A scientist at the end of Shyamalan’s film explains: “This was an act of nature and we will never fully understand it . . . this event may have been a prelude or a warning, like the first spot of a

Convergences
New: “Life, uh, finds a way”

rash . . . we have been a threat to this planet” (*The Happening*). If we have been a threat to this planet as the scientist suggests, and if plants communicate with each other to signal warnings as Wohlleben indicates, then the event in the film is not a warning for the human race, but a communal communication between the plants warning one another of an apocalyptic human threat. In an interview with Bruce Kirkland of *Toronto Sun* Shyamalan identifies his position on the topic of environmentalism and recalls an enlightening moment in his research for the film as he notes the way humanity has become a threat to the planet: “Any rational person can see that there will be nothing left if we continue to do what we are doing. We have to change and then admit, perhaps, that we don't have carte blanche on this planet. Planet Earth is one entity . . . and it is capable of defending itself” (Toronto Sun). Shyamalan’s sentiments are not far from Powers’ stance which calls for humanity to “Do nothing” (460), as he notes humans do not necessarily have an unlimited discretionary power to act as the planet earth is capable of defending itself.

Not far from Powers’ and Shyamalan’s assertion that the earth will still continue living with, or without, the human race are environmental ideas surrounding apocalyptic narratives such as Garreth Edwards’ *Godzilla* and even Stephen Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park*. While human progress could result in the eventual end for the human race, as Powers asserts in his novel: “Human progress is still not the end for nature” (497). Nature will continue finding a way to survive, no matter how hard humanity pushes against its forces. These same sentiments are shared by mathematical theorist Malcolm in *Jurassic Park* as he famously states: “Life, uh, finds a way” (*Jurassic Park*). As Malcolm realizes, however, there is a deep-seated flaw in the human condition in attempting to preserve and create life. Like the scientific ambition that pushes characters against natural forces and disrupts the human bond with nature in the Gothic

Convergences
New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

Romance, the scientists in *Jurassic Park* push against the forces of space and time in *Jurassic Park* to create their own small apocalypse within the gates of the park. Matti Rissanen points to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1623) to define nature's power over humankind, claiming humankind is allowed to live on this planet for a certain amount of time as leased by nature: "There is a contract, a 'bond,' between man and nature: man has his life from nature by lease, by copyhold" (716). Where Macbeth fought against nature's lease by claiming human lives to preserve his own, the scientists in *Jurassic Park* are disrupting the lease by bringing back an organism that had already outlived its lease; both scenarios are disruptive to the natural forces of space and time and, as concluded in both timelines, are detrimental to the human race. This idea that humankind can beat nature is disclosed and disproved further in Powers' novel, as well as in Edwards' *Godzilla*.

Powers lightly hinges on another ecocritical idea that can be seen evolving into a Gothic trope with Nick and Olivia's fight for nature against the timber companies. While seated in the great tree Mimas, Nick and Olivia contemplate their battle against the logging industry. Olivia reassures Nick their fight to save the trees will not be in vain: "They can't win. They can't beat nature" (292). Olivia knows that while the logging industry will be successful in the removal of many trees, they will never control nature. While the *Godzilla* movies are generally interpreted as mere monster movies, newer writers have extended the original metaphor of the dangers that come from nuclear testing to the dangers that come from trying to kill or control the powerful forces of nature; *Godzilla* becomes a visual representation of nature itself.

The movie begins with military forces luring *Godzilla* into the ocean to kill him with a nuclear bomb, which could already be understood as dangerous to the environment. It is later discovered that the nuclear strike may not have killed *Godzilla* as a skeleton and two hatched

Convergences
New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

spores are found in a uranium mine. Like the trees and the earth at the end of Powers' novel, the trees in the *Happening*, and the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*, life has found a way to survive. As a nuclear powerplant begins to disrupt the environment again later in the movie, Godzilla resurfaces and attempts to avenge the destruction of his environment. As human forces attempt to fight Godzilla to protect themselves, and *their* world, Godzilla attempts to restore the world as his own. Dr. Ishiro Seriwaza further draws a connection between Godzilla and nature, and humanity's attempts to control and destroy: "The arrogance of man is thinking nature is in his control, and not the other way around. Let them fight . . . Nature has an order, a power to restore balance" (*Godzilla, 2014*). The same idea Powers puts forth with his "do nothing" (460), resurfaces again with Dr. Seriwaza's acknowledgement of Godzilla as a force of nature. However, where Powers suggests the best thing humanity can do for nature is to do nothing, Seriwaza recognizes that humanity will, in fact, continue to fight. Because Seriwaza recognizes humanity's inability to give up the fight against nature, he is able to predict the devastating future for himself and his crew as he alone steps away to acknowledge defeat.

As the seedlings spring up from the decomposition of the dead trees at the end of Powers' novel, life will find a way to exist past death. Powers combines the non-fiction realities of contemporary society and the fictional realities of his characters to make an important statement about the secrets of nature that exist around death. Through his work, Powers illuminates the capacity art has to shed light on these secrets and the artist's role in mediating a harmonious connection between humankind and nature by suggesting there is nothing we can do to prevent death or to keep nature from finding a way to survive. The earth does not need humankind to survive and may, in fact, thrive off of humanity's extinction as new life is born from decay. If nature does not need humanity to survive, then the important ecocritical statement being made by

Convergences

New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

artists such as Powers, Shyamalan, Garreth, and Spielberg is that humanity needs to focus on environmental issues as a way to preserve itself, and as Powers illustrates, the artist is essential in revolutionizing this idea and preserving human life in world that belongs to the trees.

Convergences
New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

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Convergences
New: "Life, uh, finds a way"

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