"Revising Western Epistemic Arrogance in the Postcolony: Inga Simpson's *Understory: A Life With Trees* and *Where the Trees Were*"[1]

Bárbara Arizti Martín
Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana

Introduction

This paper is based on the analysis of two works by the Australian novelist and nature writer Inga Simpson: her memoir *Understory: A Life with Trees* (2017) and her third novel *Where the Trees Were* (2016). I analyse Simpson's special relationship with trees in these two works so as to illustrate a very relevant phenomenon currently taking place in Australian letters: the revision of Western epistemologies by authors of European ancestry, mostly through an ethical engagement with Indigenous Australians' thought worlds. I argue that the dominance of Western forms of knowledge, an instance of epistemic arrogance which was a constituent part of the colonising process in Australia and elsewhere, is being gently but surely undermined in contemporary Australian writing.

I believe this process is best understood in the light of transmodernity, the emerging sociocultural paradigm. A substantial list of scholars such as Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, Marc Luyckx, Irena Ateljevic, Susana Onega, Jean-Michel Ganteau, Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen and José María Yebra-Pertusa, state that postmodernity has been succeeded by transmodernity, a revision and rehabilitation of the best of modernity after the intense and healthy scrutiny of postmodern thought. Transmodernity is partly an effort to counterbalance the pernicious effects of postmodern radical skepticism, relativism and

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navel-gazing solipsism. The transmodern paradigm promotes a return to ethics, foregrounds relationality and the importance of the community and opens the door to the reenchantment of the world. It is especially significant for my analysis that transmodernity expands its gaze to include aspects of pre-modernity previously discarded as primitive and unscientific. To put it in graphic terms, in transmodernity, elements of the pre-modern, modern and postmodern re-emerge and intermingle, as successive inscriptions do on the surface of a palimpsest.

Following Luyckx, I regard transmodernity as a global mind change, still very much in the offing, characterised by values such as "respect for Mother Nature, care for communities, for family relations, for internal growth, for other cultures" (Luyckx 2010, 40). It is precisely this interest in other cultures that has brought along an attempt to redress the balance in the dissemination of knowledge and contest the long-standing dominance of the West over the Rest. The Argentine-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel challenges Westerncentrism and explains transmodernity as a project involving "the development of the potential of those cultures and philosophies that have been ignored, upon the basis of their own resources, in constructive dialogue with European and North American modernity" (2009, 514). The starting point for this task, Dussel asserts, is "that which has been […] devalued and judged useless among global cultures, including colonized or peripheral philosophies" (514).

It is clear that this turn to previously marginalised cultures and philosophies can work in synergy with decolonial Indigeneity and its aim to restore "Indigenous practices, languages and connection to ways of being" ("Decolonizing and Indigenizing" 2023). Besides, I'm finding evidence in Australian letters that the transmodern turn to Indigenous philosophies and practices goes beyond New Age exoticism and folklorism and is at pains to avoid the unethical practice of cultural appropriation. Susan Scafidi defines cultural

appropriation as "taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission." This phenomenon is "most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects" (quoted in Layman 2021, n.p.). This is definitely the case with white settler colonies like Australia, where First Australians still face the injurious legacy of colonialism in the form of cultural genocide, for instance, the destruction of sacred sites and the removal of meaningful artifacts. Justifiably, Indigenous voices in Australia and elsewhere have denounced cultural appropriation as a veiled form of neocolonial exploitation (Jennifer 2023).

I will next analyse Simpson's memoir *Understory: A Life with Trees* (2017) and her novel *Where the Trees Were* as providing a new perspective on Indigeneity in harmony with the transmodern mentality. This perspective strives to avoid the pitfalls of cultural appropriation, takes on responsibility for past and present damage done to Indigenous Australians and their culture and acknowledges the pain of unbelonging lurking behind some forms of apology and reconciliation by white Australia.

Simpson lived in a forest in Queensland for ten years. Her memoir *Understory: A Life with Trees* is a vivid account of her fascination with trees and a long, beautifully crafted thank-you note about how dwelling among trees utterly changed her. There, she aims to expand the limits of communication between humans and trees by learning the language of the forest. In this process, she is inspired by Indigenous culture and language. The fact that she is "a fifth-generation descendant of white settlers" (2017, xi) and that Australia is not her "blood's country" is a cause of anxiety for her, as it is for many European Australians, who are often on the verge of unbelonging (Gooder and Jacobs 2000). However, Simpson's sensibility towards her country of birth is refined in the

course of the memoir: first, she denounces the exploits of colonisation such as the murder and dispossession of the Indigenous Australians (5); second, she recognises the absent presence of Indigenous groups on the parts of the continent she is most familiar with, like the Wiradjuri on her father's farm and the Kabi-Kabi on the forest area she lives in (17, 53, 54, 215); third, she laments the neglect of ancient Indigenous cultures and progressively opens herself to their wisdom so as to correct and complement her foreign frames of reference (5, 194). This last aspect is triggered by her desire to learn the language of the forest and materialises in her mounting curiosity for the Indigenous names of trees: "These trees speak to me, though not in any of the languages in which I am versed" (176).

Progressively, Simpson starts using the Latin names of trees she picks up from botanists more sparingly and turns instead to the Indigenous names, which she believes render trees in a different light. This is a move away from the imported taxonomic frenzy of colonial botanists and their Eurocentric stance:

> I come across the Wiradjuri word for ironbark, magga. [. . .] I could learn the vocabulary of Wiradjuri country, where I grew up, and of Kabi Kabi country where I ended up. Not with the intention of trying to speak the language, or to claim anything more than I really have that isn't mine, but to at least learn the proper names for these trees and plants and birds and animals. It makes a whole lot more sense than Latin. (Simpson 2017, 194)

Simpson finds that the sounds, the grammar and the syntax of the Indigenous languages manifest the quality of "the places and people that shaped them, and the relationships between things" (194), resulting in a more organic approach to the environment. The inseparability of the species and the sentient quality of the other-than-human world strike her as particularly important: "Aboriginal languages afford trees sentience, not insisting on such a division between us and them. The grammar shows relationships—between humans, the land and other species" (276).

The fact that Simpson ends up embracing local knowledges needs to be understood as part of the current turn to Indigenous wisdom accounted for by Beate Neumeier. This turn is, as I said before, a defining trait of the transmodern paradigm, promoting a more comprehensive web of knowledge where world views and cosmologies that were looked down on by modernity for being primitive are now recognised as having important contributions to make to a more meaningful and ethical way of life. Neumeier defends that Australia is witnessing "attempts to reconceptualize the relation between the human and the non-human world in terms of connectivity, relatedness, and a 'care for country' by turning to Indigenous knowledge systems" (2020, 3). In a similar way, the Indigenous scholar Vicki Grieves believes that "Contemporary Western thinkers are referencing Aboriginal Spirituality in their quest for meaning and in their critiques of Western materialist notions of progress" (28).

It is crucial that, among Indigenous voices, there are invitations to partake of their ancient cultures, like David Mowaljarlai's, senior Lawman of the Ngarinyin people and a well-known artist and philosopher: "We have a gift we want to give you. [. . .] And it's the gift of pattern thinking. It's the culture which is the blood of this country, of Aboriginal groups, of the ecology, of the land itself" (as quoted in Grieves 7). Simpson, steeped in Greek myth (Simpson 2017, 81) and English Literature (5), well-read in classical and contemporary European, US and Australian nature writing (xiv, 10, 41, 100, 108, 193) and a *Lord of the Rings* enthusiast, expands her "genetic memory" (5) by putting these references into dialogue with Indigenous lore.

Simpson's third novel, *Where the Trees Were* (2016), also encourages a fruitful dialogue between transmodernity and decolonial Indigeneity. The story features a female protagonist, Jayne, and is partly an account of her coming-of-age on the family farm in New South Wales. Simpson interlaces chapters on Jayne's teenage years in the late 1980s

and early 1990s and her adult life in Canberra as a museum conservationist in the 2000s. I analyse the arborglyph —a ceremonial tree carved by some groups of Indigenous Australians to mark a sacred place— in conversation with the concept of "natureculture." The analysis confirms the turn to Australian Indigenous knowledges and highlights how Indigenous wisdom both anticipates and provides a solid foundation for state-of-the-art western theoretical constructs.

Under the cover of her museum job, Jayne helps Ian, her Indigenous childhood friend, to return arborglyphs removed from their original locations and featuring as exhibits to secret natural spots. This is, to a great extent, the protagonist's way of making up for a terrible incident that marked her childhood: The destruction of a grove of arborglyphs by her father so as to retain the legal title to his farmland. He sees ceremonial trees as a threat to the family property after the passing of the Native Title Act in 1993 granting Indigenous Australians some rights over their traditional lands. Jayne's smuggling of arborglyphs from museums also aims to remedy in some measure historical mistreatment and neglect of Indigenous Australians and their ancient culture.

Jayne's commitment to preserving arborglyphs provides a cue for studying how the insights of Indigenous wisdom predate western cutting-edge concepts such as natureculture. The term natureculture was coined by Donna Haraway in 2003 in an attempt to overcome the dualism at the basis of much western thought. It stresses the continuity between the two poles and questions their hierarchical relationship. Rosi Braidotti also speaks of "a 'naturecultures' continuum" in the process of dismantling the either/or tenets of anthropocentrism.

In Australia, the philosopher and ecofeminist critic Val Plumwood takes a more nuanced view of the relationship between the two terms: she advocates the right balance between difference and continuity. Plumwood suggests an ethics that allows for "both

continuity and difference and for ties to nature which are expressive of the rich, caring relationships of kinship and friendship" (1991, 16). For her, it is not simply a question of reversing the power dynamics in the binary of opposition but of acknowledging the connections between the two terms and appreciating their distinctive value: "There is the problem of how to reintegrate nature and culture across the great western division between them and how to give a positive value to what has been traditionally devalued and excluded as nature without simply reversing values and rejecting the sphere of culture" (1993, 10–11; emphasis in original). Plumwood's stance is based on a "relational account of the self, which clearly recognises the distinctness of nature but also our relationship and continuity with it" (1991, 29). In this, she takes inspiration from Indigenous thought worlds highlighting "the connections between people and parts of the natural world in bonds of mutual life-giving" (Rose, James and Watson 2003).

The arborglyph is a carved living tree that is at the same time culturally significant and integral to the natural world. It provides a complex signifier of the mutually enriching relationship between nature and culture. Ceremonial trees are a very tangible and literal example of living heritage, defined by UNESCO as "the living expression of oral traditions, craft skills, artistic, social or ritual customs, knowledge and know-how handed down to us by previous generations" and acting as a bridge between "traditional and contemporary cultural values" (Cities and Living Heritage 2023). Carved trees retain the vital force of the natural world, or *zoe*, but, being cultural artifacts, this vital force of life is meaningfully blended with *bios*, "the prerogative of Anthropos" (Braidotti 2018, 5).

In *Where the Trees Were*, arborglyphs occupy an ambivalent position. On the one hand, they are connected with colonial and neocolonial attitudes to Indigenous peoples and cultures; on the other, they resonate with the transmodern mindset. A group of arborglyphs is cut off and burnt by Jayne's father to cover up the usurpation of traditional

lands by European settlers. At the same time, they exert an ambiguous attraction on white Australians, who covet them as exhibits. Simpson provides some important information:

> Many arborglyphs were destroyed as part of the initial dispossession and clearing of Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri land for farming. Some were later cut down and removed for display in gardens, museums and galleries. There were still many in place as late as the 1960s. While some would have been lost to natural causes, as a child of the 1970s and 1980s, I remember some of the conversations around the introduction of Native Title. I can imagine what happened to the rest of those trees. (300)

Since they are rather ephemeral cultural objects, carved trees echo the vulnerability of nature and of all living forms. Once uprooted from their natural spaces, the vital force of life is lost even if they still preserve their cultural connotations. The removal of the arborglyphs from the land dissolves the smooth continuity between nature and culture appreciated by their Indigenous artificers and stands for the imbalance of the two terms in the western divide.

In Simpson's novel, Jayne and her teenage friends are mesmerised by the copse of arborglyphs they come across on her father's farm. The trees become fully significant when Ian, whose mother is Aboriginal, explains that it is a burial place for one of their ancestors and that they should not be playing there. As an adult working in museum conservation, Jayne learns that burial trees are not regarded as particularly worthy exhibits, despite their undeniable value for Indigenous Australians. For her, in contrast, the arborglyph she helps smuggle is "more than a tree": "artefact, artwork, sacred object, part of a sacred site. It was worth a hell of a lot to the right people" (17). The lack of interest of the gallery's director-general mirrors Dussel's words on the lack of value assigned to non-dominant cultures (514). It also resonates with Jayne's thoughts at high school on how official history neglects Indigenous Australians: "Despite doing every history unit available, […] there was nothing about the people who had been here before us, or those who were here still —Ian, right here in our classroom" (235). Conversely,

Jayne's concern for arborglyphs and her collaboration with Ian in returning them to nature, even at the risk of her job, align her with the transmodern mindset. A visit to the natural location where the smuggled tree now is, with special permission from the elders, further fuels her involvement in recovering arborglyphs.

Summing up, both *Understory* and *Where the Trees Were* confirm the emerging tendency among white Australian authors to acknowledge the valuable contribution of Indigenous culture and to rely on it for a deeper understanding of the reality of the postcolony. *Understory* portrays the author's journey from western scientific knowledge towards Indigenous culture and lore. *Where the Trees Were* demonstrates that the ancient insights of Indigenous wisdom as embodied in the figure of the arborglyph predate and substantiate the concept of "natureculture." When studied through the lens of transmodernity, the memoir and the novel point to a change in sensibility which involves turning to pre-modern worldviews that can help deal with contemporary human and environmental crises.

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