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INGA SIMPSON'S *UNDERSTORY, A LIFE WITH TREES*
A taxonomy of Australian landscape

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Abstract – This essay focuses on Inga Simpson's *Understory: A Life with Trees* (2017) through which Australian flora and fauna become a powerful expression of her ecological activism and bioregional awareness. This will be analyzed by using Riane Eisler's biocultural partnership-domination paradigm to highlight the relationship between Australian culture and its natural environment, in particular the threatening impact of human beings and climate change. Simpson's interest in the 'cognitive' functions of plants (recognitions, learning mechanisms and remembrance) will also show significant analogies with Monica Gagliano and Stefano Mancuso's studies.

Keywords: Inga Simpson; *Understory: A Life with Trees*; Australian nature writing; partnership studies; plant studies.

1. Introduction

In the history of Australian literature, a great number of Australian narratives have given voice to flora and fauna classification and the impact of human actions on the environment. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the way Australian literature has made to the development of our contemporary environmental consciousness combining also Indigenous land management.

The purpose of my paper is to consider Inga Simpson's *Understory: A Life with Trees* in order to explore how Australian flora and fauna become a powerful expression of her ecological activism and bioregional awareness. The first section begins by contextualizing Simpson's eco-memoir within the Australian nature writing tradition in order to investigate the relationship between Australian culture and its natural environment. The author describes the South-east Queensland bioregion defining the area from an ecological and geographical point of view and using information from not only the natural sciences, but also from Aboriginal customs and traditions. The idea to outline the environmental characteristics achieves Simpson's goal of restoring and maintaining the local natural system. The second section demonstrates how Riane Eisler's biocultural partnership-domination paradigm is an essential methodological background to show how the negative actions of human have a powerful impact on the environment. Eisler's biocultural transformation theory (Eisler, Fry 2019) can be read as an environmental revolution which is capable of saving the Earth from its collapse. Simpson rejected urban living in favor of a simpler life in connection with the seasons of the Sunshine coast hinterland, and a positive ecological practice which must go beyond the boundaries between human/animal and nature/culture as demonstrated in Riane Eisler's biocultural paradigm. In *Understory*, the scientific descriptions of plants lead to interspecies

epistemologies: trees maintain an ecological balance. In this sense, in the last paragraph I will investigate Simpson's interest in the 'cognitive' functions of plants (recognitions, learning mechanisms and remembrance) through Monica Gagliano (Gagliano 2019) and Stefano Mancuso's studies on plant biology (Mancuso 2019).

2. Echoes of Australian nature writing

Inga Simpson's acclaimed eco-memoir *Understory: A Life with Trees* (2017) is a fundamental contribution to the Australian nature writing tradition (Tredinnick 2003) since it illustrates the importance of a sustainable way of living in harmony with the environment and its native species. The author narrates her *tree change* occurred in 2006 when she decided to escape from suburban Brisbane to a cedar cottage on ten acres of land to experiment how nature and rural living could give a deeper purpose to her writing life. The illusory idea of modernization as a positive transition from a "pre-modern" or "traditional" to a "developed" or "industrialized" society has inevitably estranged human beings from the ecosystems, the fabric of real life on which all of us depend. Inga Simpson is aware of the way revolutionary technologies cause deterioration of the environment and increase social injustices. However, her experience in the country will also awaken her to the hardships of rural life: the romantic and idealistic idea of an uncontaminated nature never touched by human beings and which must be preserved in order not to come into contact with our species conceals premises that lead to domination, exploitation, and destruction of the environment. The outside world's potential for the loss of biodiversity hovers around the eco-memoir demonstrating how fragile and precious is our Earth. In other words, *Understory*'s environmental message deals with the assumption that all living beings are linked together in food webs and chains. It is therefore not surprising that the alteration of even a small part of an ecosystem can produce incalculable effects somewhere else. How animals and plants in an ecosystem depend on each other is called natural balance.

Inga Simpson was born in Young and grew up as an only child on a farm near Grenfell, in central New South Wales – birthplace of Henry Lawson and Eric Rolls. As a child she spent most of her time in close contact with nature, camping alone among the iron barks on a hill at the back of her parents' property. As she said in an interview, her childhood and adolescence were characterized by an early fascination with literature and a passion for being close to Nature that would strongly determine her future attitude as a nature-environmentalist writer and activist:

> From twelve or thirteen, I camped out alone with the rocks, trees and stars. I would carry in everything I needed – at first on foot, and later on my motorbike. To reach my campsite, I had to cross the main road and the neighbour's paddocks, negotiating three difficult gates. The final leg was a tough climb over logs and rocks.
> There was a flattish site for a tent and a large stone fireplace, overlooking crop and grazing land: straight boundary fences and lanes transecting the curves of tree-lined creek beds and ridgelines. After sundown, my ironbark sentinels faded into the dark. The sky was bright and vast, sounds carried from far off, and I could just make out the glow of the next town.
> By day I wandered, collecting itchy seedpod boats from beneath kurrajongs to sail on the dam, where mistletoe-infected trees admired their own reflections. Or sketching the delicate bluebells that appeared, as if from nowhere, in spring and summer. Below my campsite, on the cool side of the hill, there were a handful of boulders. They lay as if scattered by a giant. No matter how carefully I climbed down, the black wallabies thumped away at the first snap of a twig or scrape of my boot, leaving me to explore the shade-loving ferns and mosses and orchids – a secret world of green. (Simpson 2016, pp. 295-296)

These glimpses of her growing in a farm well show how her narrative talents are woven and interlaced with the Australian bush. These memories are fundamental elements in her writing, especially in *Understory*, because they reveal Simpson's praise for the landscape which lies in the tradition of Australian nature writing. In 2017, along with the publication of her eco-memoir, she obtained a PhD on the history of Australian nature writing at the University of Queensland. According to her, Australian nature writing was shaped by British and American traditions, but it has also developed its own features due to the continent's unique landscapes, flora and fauna, the dynamics and consequences of European colonization which impacted both the landscape and Indigenous cultures and traditions. In particular, Australian nature writers have played an important role in describing the initial unfamiliar relationship with the environment to reach a sense of belonging to the land. They have also shaped an ecological concern and socio-cultural activism for the preservation of the environment. Thus, Nature writing became an essential tool for exploring the growing relationships of Australians with their landscapes.

During that period, the writer planted hundreds of trees, revealing a deep understanding of tree peculiarities and their use for Aborigines. Remembering the tradition of nature writing and the images of Australian places, Inga Simpson's work creates and strengthens her union with nature. In fact, only through a deep knowledge of the Australian territory is it possible to seek respect and appreciation for biodiversity.

At the beginning of *Understory*, there are two quotes from *Wildwood* by Roger Deakin and *Lichen Tufts: From the Alleghanies* by Elizabeth C. Wright that recall the American and British nature writing tradition. Both references highlight a refusal of industrialized cities in order to find harmony with nature away from the illusory world of progress and technological innovation. The keywords that emerge are forest, wood and trees as a way to praise Earth's biodiversity and reveal the idea of nature as a place to restore humankind's physical and mental health. Like other exponents of nature writing, Inga Simpson's memoir merges her personal and reading life while providing a detached perception of nature. Simpson's writing shows an attention towards a specific environment, its organisms, and the seasonal changes; it also gives an exhaustive historical description of the landscape as witness of history:

> Some time after we had stopped taking stones, a mining company came. They drilled around the trig site, hopeful of finding more gold and other animals. The area showed up as some sort of hotspot and I thought, at the time, that this meant we would be rich. My parents tried to explain the concept – relevant again today for landholders fighting coal seam gas mining – that we only owned the skin of the land. […] Years later, a different company approached my mother, wanting to take more samples. As if new technology and new men with white, embossed business cards could unearth what others had not. 'Can't you say no?' I asked, envying for a moment the gold rush days, when you could just run someone off with a shotgun.
> 'Don't they have to pay you?'
> Apparently not. The company went ahead and drilled another set of holes all over the hills, deep into the bedrock, and asked if they could use water from the nearby dam to cool their machinery. It was during a severe drought, so to this my mother did say no. The resulting cores, in yellowing plastic bags, lay about for a few years. Eventually the company withdrew, without explanation, taking their rubbish with them. Whatever riches lie beneath will remain there. For now. I have come to see the removal of those core samples as an assault on the land, although by no means the first. In all of the recorded history of the property, there is no mention of the traditional owners, the First Australians who lived in the area. At school, Australian history began in 1788, and ancient history was about the Greeks and Romans. (Simpson 2017, pp. 52-53)

In order to show that the aggressive dominator and exploitative approach to the landscape is yet unchanged, Simpson connects the actions and attitude of contemporary gold and other mineral mining companies to the period of the 19th century gold rushes in Australia. The most significant of these occurred in New South Wales and in Victoria during the 1850s, and in Western Australia during the 1890s (Rickard 1996, p. 32). At that time, the government decided not to reveal the discovery of gold due to the fear of a possible social disorder. However, this yellow fever caused many migration waves from America, Ireland, Scotland, Italy and Germany. Within two years the total population had raised from 77,000 to 540,000 reaching 1,7 million in 1871. The historical context of gold rushes was characterised by liberal land laws and many colonists began to devote themselves to agriculture, which actually meant grabbing land from Aboriginal native peoples. This passage from her memoir shows the destructive impact of the gold rush on the Australian environment and culture, which rapidly devastated ecosystems, disrupting the native flora and fauna and indigenous cultures; it also underlines how Indigenous Australians are the original owners of the land while white Australians are dominator exploiters, invaders and colonizers. In tune with Aboriginal beliefs and lore, Simpson gives voice to an ecological perspective, characterising the land as an entity embodying spiritual, physical, social and cultural elements. Connecting her writing to the heritage of Australian nature writing, she stresses the importance of a widespread environmental change. As she declares in her essay *Encounters with Amnesia* (Simpson 2019), nature writing was an innate process for Aboriginal people to reveal their profound spiritual connection to land, while for settler-Australians this literary genre gave voice to their sense of unfamiliarity with an unknown environment. Simpson refers to some writers of the Australian nature writing tradition, especially Annamaria Weldon, Eric Rolls, and Mark Tredinnick, to demonstrate how they have embraced bioregional themes in order to claim a balanced approach to the land and its natural resources through the adoption of a sustainable way of living.

The first Australian writer Simpson mentions is Annamaria Weldon, a West Australian poet who was born in Malta:

> This forest is an *ecotone*, rich in life, supporting greater diversity than either of the ecosystems it delineates between. As Annamaria Weldon notes in her essay 'Threshold Country', like all margins and thresholds, ecotones are dynamic places where life has to adapt to survive. They are sites of possibility. We were part of the forest from the start. As we began changing things, settling in, it was already changing us. (Simpson 2017, p. 6)

Simpson employs the word *ecotone* – a territory of transition between two biological communities – to describe the great diversity of ecosystems that characterize the Sunshine Coast hinterland and rethink the natural world as a balanced and unified area to which humanity must revise its relation. We know how the destructive history of colonialism was based on the idea of hybridity in the contact zone. Western Australia, from where Annamaria Weldon writes, has a long history of cultural fragmentation due to the inevitable outcomes of first contact between the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land and settler people. Weldon's *Threshold Country* deals with coastal strip of limestone near Mandurah known as Yalgorup National Park and portrays its environment not only with scientific exactitude, but also through the perspective of Bindjareb Noongar, the land's first people. Before writing about the original owners and custodians of the South West of Western Australia, Weldon obtains their approval to include in her work the Aboriginal names for flora and fauna.

Similarly, in the writing process of *Understory* the author herself develops an environmental consciousness through Gubbi Gubbi and Wiradjuri traditions:

> One of my reference books suggests that Aboriginal peoples used timber for boomerangs and clubs. The trees we planted are mature now, but I can still get my hands around their trunks. Perhaps they will fatten up. They have suckered seedlings beneath, to replace themselves when they go. And there are others coming on, close by, facilitated by birds, and the cycle continues. (Simpson 2017, p. 128)

In the period spent on the Sunshine Coast hinterland, Inga Simpson planted hundreds of trees, showing her deep knowledge of arboreal peculiarities and the relative use for Aboriginal peoples. Indigenous peoples of Australia developed their own technologies, which derived from their close relationship with the landscape and their talent to create useful artefacts. The items they fabricated depended on the geographical area where they settled: people who lived on the coasts employed fishbone to tip their tools, while desert tribes worked with stone tips. Despite this general division between groups and geographical locations, all the Indigenous peoples of Australia had utensils like knives, scrapers, spears, vessels for eating and drinking. In this case, we learn that Gubbi Gubbi and Wiradjuri employed timber for boomerangs and clubs.

Another key text for Simpson is Eric Rolls's *A Million Wild Acres: 200 Hundred Years of Man and an Australian Forest*, which describes the relationship between geographical and social contact areas; it introduces evidence of European occupation and their logic of exploitation of Australia, and underlines how it had severe environmental impact:

> In *A Million Wild Acres*, Rolls describes narrow-leafed ironbarks growing fifty metres apart in the Pilliga – before colonization, burning practices and kangaroo rats kept down. When traditional burning practices ceased, and kangaroo rat numbers diminished, patches of ironbarks grew unchecked, turning into scrub. (Simpson 2017, p. 257)

Eric Rolls was an environmentalist whose work on the ecological history of Pilliga forest in north-central New South Wales has influenced Simpson to introduce the theme of Indigenous Australian fire practices to manage the landscape. Before the European invasion, Aborigines regularly used fire to regenerate new vegetation growth and develop suitable food plants. What is more, the fruitful germination after the burning process was controlled by the great variety of fauna such as wallabies, and rat kangaroos, which took nourishment from the seedlings. The effects of colonization over Australian forests determined an excessive mixture among plants and animals. Simpson's prose captures the typical "wild" features of Australian nature and the hybrid environment as the outcome of human intervention. Her deep knowledge of arboreal peculiarities and of Australian environment is demonstrated by her employment of plant taxonomy, disclosing her care for flora and fauna. Simpson's interest in the taxonomic detail allows her to organize her writing and "to focus on one species at a time"[1] establishing a profound relationship with Australian landscape. As Jane Frank states "Simpson's use of landscape [...] is evidence of her working towards a correction of the complex, multi-faceted relationship of people with rural Australia." (Frank 2017, p. 231). However, it is important to underline that the complicated connection of Australian people with their land has been always influenced by colonial history. During the age of imperialism, taxonomy was a tool for endangering not only the local cultures, but also of destroying its biodiversity. According to Harriet Ritvo, alongside with the political control over abroad territories and their exploitation,

[1] See: https://theplanthunter.com.au/people/inga-simpson-writer-woman-trees/.

biological nomenclature reflected "a complex set of rules and conventions" (Ritvo 1997, p. 337). The Eurocentric concern for animals and plants classification is positively subverted by Inga Simpson to orientate herself in the south-east Queensland bioregion. Such orientation leads to an ecological activism whose main aim is to use natural resources in a sustainable way in order to preserve the biodiversity and wilderness of that specific area.

As the seasons come and go, she examines and describes flora and fauna, getting to know the place and falling into the rhythm of nature. The reader learns of the personalities of the trees, such as lilly pilly, she-oaks and dogwood. In particular, the description of she-oaks is related to the allusion to Mark Tredinnik's *The Blue Plateau: A landscape memoir*:

> One of my favourite passages in Mark Tredinnick's *The Blue Plateau: A landscape memoir*, about the Blue Mountains, describes she-oaks making love with the wind. Heavy with pollen, the male trees are 'rusted at the tips'. There is a she-oak forest at the end of the beach where we walk one evening a week. The path to the spit passes through a forest of coastal she-oaks or *Casuarina equisetifolia*. (Simpson 2017, pp. 130-131)

Once again Simpson's description reveals the great variety of Australian landscapes through a paraphrase of an excerpt about she-oaks contained in the story of the poet Tredinnik; evoking that specific scene she is poetically involved in the portrayal of the forest. Simpson's ambition discloses a strong desire to give voice to the complexities of the (Ab)original Australian history, exploring the social and environmental layers of a land that has been too often described as an 'uncanny' place (Gelder, Jacobs 1998).

3. A biocultural alternative

Riane Eisler's biocultural partnership-domination paradigm provides an effective alternative to the current domination and exploitation of nature. It also offers an insightful methodological framework for highlighting the fundamental connection between people and their environment for the realization of a sustainable future.[2] In particular, the capacity to enjoy a harmonious relationship with nature and the negative ramifications of human domination described in *Understory* recall what Riane Eisler defines as dominator and partnership models (Eisler 1987) symbolically represented by the chalice (nurturing and sustaining life) and the blade (tool of fear, violence and destruction).

In her studies, Eisler demonstrates that ancient populations based their social organization on equal treatment of men and women in order to reach a common well-being. These communities were also characterized by a sense of harmony with the natural environment taking care of biodiversity. At the same time, some historical moments stood out for societies which employed intimidation and armed conflicts to establish a real domination and exploit natural resources. Her latest book *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future* analyses how social and economic systems advance divergently in these two antithetical environments, and calls for responses leading contemporary society towards a cultural transformation based upon an ethical and sustainable living:

[2] See the work of the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) at Udine University (https://partnershipstudiesgroup.uniud.it/?page_id=5&lang=it), in particular the recent volume *Ecology and Partnerships Studies in Anglophone Literatures*, 2020.

> Rather than viewing societies through the lenses of familiar social categories such as religious versus secular, Eastern versus Western, rightist versus leftist, or capitalist versus socialist, which only describe a particular aspect of society, the Biocultural Partnership-Domination Lens uses two larger cultural configurations at opposite ends of a continuum: the partnership system and the domination system. This broader frame makes it possible to identify the conditions that support the expression of our human capacities for caring, creativity, and consciousness or, alternately, for insensitivity, cruelty, and destructiveness. It upends age-old assumptions about human nature and the supposed impossibility of improving the human condition, showing how we can bring about fundamental change. The new interdisciplinary perspective of the Biocultural Partnership-Domination Lens reveals how cultural beliefs and social institutions such as politics, economics and education affect, and are in turn affected by, childhood and gender relations; highlights the impact of these early experiences and observations on how our brains develop; and shows how we can use our knowledge of human development to construct equitable and sustainable cultures that maximize human well-being. (Eisler, Fry 2019, pp. 11-13)

In this sense, the Australian writer's eco-memoir exemplifies Eisler's biocultural Partnership-Domination Lens which integrates disciplines, ranging from biology, history, and sociology, to solve not only environmental issues, but also social and economic problems. In *Understory*, there are some emblematic sections that express analogies with Eisler's researches. Throughout her narration, for instance, the imminent issues related to the worlds of bureaucracy and electricity and to real estate companies threaten the forest heaven and Inga's need to safeguard the environment:

> Meanwhile, our forest was getting smaller. There was the easement on one side, and our noisy neighbours on the other. Ten acres had seemed like a lot of land, but these encroachments limited our space and privacy. The machines in the garden kept coming. More and more clearing was going on every day along our road and around town. In the formerly picturesque valley between Palmwoods and Woombye, where we did our shopping, hundreds of acres were being torn up for estates. They railway line was to be duplicated and straightened, a water pipeline rum from the Mary Valley to Brisbane, and a sewage treatment works was proposed. […] We began to talk more often, after too many glasses of red wine about buying more land, if we won Lotto (not that we ever entered), and setting up a writers retreat. It was about preserving more of the environment around us, but also the lack of quality support for writers. (Simpson 2017, p. 76)

The author underlines how technology creates a disconnection from the natural world, impacting the communication and relationships with each other as well as with nature itself. It seems that as society evolves and populations grow more resources and technology are required to the detriment of nature's own resources. However, the last sentence of this excerpt shows Simpson's aim to preserve the land in order to realize a writers' retreat as a starting point to empower people through their involvement in the process of landscape and increase dialogues for a sustainable society. In other words, Inga Simpson orients towards an eco-friendly lifestyle that tries to diminish her need of natural resources and contribute to tree plantings in order to promote both healthy environments and healthy social structure. She shows a positive change from a dominator view of reality, characterized by the human legitimacy of exploiting nature to a partnership perspective where the environment and all creatures need to be considered as a biocultural unity in diversity. As Eisler claims: "Although we cannot create a world that is totally free of violence and oppression, we can construct cultures with low levels of violence and oppression where our human capacities for creativity, caring, and consciousness are allowed to develop and flourish" (Eisler, Fry 2019, p. 20). Accordingly, Simpson's eco-memoir demonstrates how we can employ our abilities to find our place on this Earth

without neutralising whatever does not belong to our social and cultural background. Moreover, the Sunshine Coast writer accomplishes a kind of ancestral connection with her country, in order to strongly claim Aboriginal land-rights and their peaceful attitude towards life and place. The continuum between a partnership and dominator society is found in Simpson's relationship with her partner at the closing of their writers' retreat:

> My words, these small acts of tending, are enough. They are not everything, not the whole story, yet they tell my story of this place. But I don't get to stay. I'm not to be forced out of my habitat, like so many other creatures. Some people, when hollowed out by loss, need to see others experience loss, too. My legal bills have mounted up, and without payslips, it's difficult to impress bank managers. It's hard. I worry about what will happen to the place: the koalas, the wallabies, the small birds, the frogs, the trees, my seedlings. I worry about what will happen to me. But if the forest has taught me anything, it is that everything changes, nothing is permanent. (Simpson 2017, pp. 278-279).

Her writing catches the natural evolution of living things which differs from the changeless creations of human beings. But then the effects of the global financial crisis become unstainable and the couple's dreams teeter. The relationship, too, ends, leaving Simpson isolated with wild animals and an impressive debt. Eventually she is forced to leave the place. In this sad epilogue, the Australian nature writer is forced to leave her property because of financial problems. As she declared in an interview,[3] it was very difficult to conclude the book, but it was a kind of epiphany. It allowed Simpson to free herself from the typically Western thinking of ownership and assets to embrace an Aboriginal principle: the land is for everybody. It welcomes all people and offers them its provisions. The way we treat land matters: a reciprocal relationship is fundamental because the land sustains people, and people sustain and manage the land without exploiting it.

4. An ecological interaction with plants

On 14 October 2017, Simpson launched the exhibition "Trees: As Above, So Below".[4] In her speech, she gave voice to an unsolved question related to the relationship between humans and nature:

> Traditional cultures don't draw a line between nature and culture, human and nonhuman. It is artificial. A construct of science, of Christianity, and of capitalism – it is convenient isn't it, to conceive of ourselves at the top of the food chain and everything else a resource to be consumed, eaten, and experimented on. And to take no responsibility for the wellbeing of other creatures, of our environment. The study of ecology has shown us the ways in which everything is connected, a delicate interconnected set of ecosystems, which we are very much a part of. Human actions impact on these ecosystems.

Such a profound consideration on the interconnection of all living beings, rather than contemplating boundaries between human and nature, would explain the results of recent studies which have been done by evolutionary ecologists such as Monica Gagliano and Stefano Mancuso. The evidence from their research suggests that the macrocosm of living

[3] See: https://theplanthunter.com.au/people/inga-simpson-writer-woman-trees/.
[4] See: http://networksaustralia.blogspot.com/2017/11/inga-simpsons-opening-talk-for-trees-as.html?fbclid=IwAR3jpHfNACWUtggI3UR-bGc4AB7BVfkpGbkbz4v2x56r0549QHToc_yMzA0.

beings is open to all creatures and that our characteristics – as human beings – portray the rest of fauna and flora (Gagliano *et al.* 2017; Gagliano 2018; Mancuso 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019).

In *Understory*, Simpson's "metaphoric self-identification with trees" (Frank 2017, p. 229) embodies the deep relationship between plants and humans through which we perceive the role of trees as fundamental for both the writer and the planet:

> There is as much tree below ground as above it. Their roots stretch outwards and downwards, beneath me, way from the light and towards rock, soil and water drawing life out of earth. While trees appear silent and still, their growth too slow to observe, except by marking their changes over time, they are always moving beneath the surface. Water cycles up and nutrients circulate down. The tree is earth and the earth is tree. With its roots in the soil and crown in the sky, it makes sense that in many mythologies, a cosmic tree was the backbone of the universe, its roots supporting the earth, the trunk passing through the world, and the crown stretched out over the heavens, hung with stars. (Simpson 2017, pp. 170-171)

Here she merges mythological and scientific aspects to show the role of trees in our life. From a mythological point of view, the description of a tree alludes to its being a living tie between our world and the metaphysical sphere. In numerous legends, a tree is an essential part of the universal organisation allowing gods and their messengers to transit from different planets by climbing up or down the tree. Another belief about trees associates them with life and fertility. In particular, evergreen trees embody eternal life and deciduous trees, which shed their leaves in spring, symbolize regeneration after death. On the other hand, Simpson's words "The tree is earth and the earth is tree" contain the scientific elements that prove the assumptions of the myth. As a matter of fact, several scholars have explained that the existence of trees can enhance people's and children's psychological and physical health. The era we live in is strongly affected by humans' actions to the point that the Earth's ecosystems are now completely changed. In narrating her ten years in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, Inga Simpson challenges the contemporary way of living underlining the advantages of protecting trees because of their role in promoting health and social well-being by reducing atmospheric pollution, stimulating physical exercises, and improving social relationships. According to Stefano Mancuso,[5] if the plant kingdom were a community, the principles of behaviour that would guide it would be completely different from ours. If human beings noticed the Nation of plants, we could realize a revolution based on the safeguard and the expansion of organisms (Mancuso 2019). In particular, trees encourage a stable economy and can supply a variety of sources to the people that necessitate them. For example, the increase in temperatures in the cities can be reduced by trees. Plants afford habitat and feed for animals. In our human-dominated generation, we need a society which is able to interpret the need of our Earth and trees as we plan a sustainable future. Despite the overwhelming documentation from the scientific field about the environmental crisis, *Understory* demonstrates the constructive relationships among nature and all organisms. It shows that the natural environment is a fundamental component of personal and community well-being as well as an encouragement for collaborative action:

> A forest, like any ecosystem, is stronger and healthier left undisturbed; all of its parts are connected. This interconnectedness, and our place as part of nature rather than separate from

[5] Mancuso is an Italian botanist and chief of the International Laboratory of Plant Neurobiology. For more information, see: http://www.linv.org/.

> it, are at the heart of ecology, which has been around since the early twentieth century. Nature is not just a resource created for our benefit, but planet, world, ecosystem, home – it's our habitat, too. This knowledge has not slowed the destruction of forests for corporate profit and our selfish needs and wants. We think only of how we can use land, not our responsibility for it. Interconnectedness in a forest is more than a food chain or abstract mutual cooperation. It's a physical connectedness. (Simpson 2017, p. 266)

This passage indicates the author's knowledge of Peter Wohlleben's investigations on correspondence among trees. The German forester has demonstrated that trees of the same species associate with trees of other species. The evolution of forest trees is based on living in mutual relationships through communication and a shared intelligence comparable to an insect colony. The real process of transmission takes place underground (Wohlleben 2015, pp. 79-84). In an interview Wohlleben claims:

> Some are calling it the 'wood-wide web'. All the trees here, and in every forest that is not too damaged, are connected to each other through underground fungal networks. Trees share water and nutrients through the networks, and also use them to communicate. They send distress signals about drought and disease, for example, or insect attacks, and other trees alter their behavior when they receive these messages.[6]

Trees transfer chemical, hormonal and slow-pulsing electrical signs through the "wood-wide web" in order to communicate. In her book *Thus Spoke the Plant: A Remarkable Journey of Groundbreaking Scientific Discoveries and Personal Encounters with Plants*, Gagliano[7] asserts that "as plants continue to coevolve with humans (and other animal species), it is also suggested that new properties and functions for plants will emerge as new needs develop" (Gagliano 2018, p. 14). Furthermore, together with Stefano Mancuso and Daniel Robert,[8] she has proved that some plants may also emanate and disclose sounds imperceptible to human beings (Gagliano *et al.* 2012, p. 3). In addition, the field of plant cognition explored by Gagliano is very close to the way Inga Simpson is interested in studying the cognitive functions of plants, encompassing their recognition, learning developments and remembrance because it reduces the traditional gap between animals and plants. The Australian writer's deep knowledge of arboreal peculiarities and of Australian landscape ecosystems is demonstrated by her employment of plant taxonomy, disclosing her care of flora and fauna:

> GREY GUMS ARE THE PILLARS OF THE FOREST. NATIVE TO THE SOUTH-EAST Queensland and eastern New South Wales. Eucalyptus propinqua, or small-fruited grey gums, specialize in poor soils. They grow in open sclerophyll forest, and get on well with bloodwoods, spotted gums and ironbarks. Grey gums have a tall straight trunk reaching fifty metres, with no lower limbs – they shed them as they soar. The tree's common name comes from their bark, which has a greyish tone. Like humans, the older they get, the more grey they become. Grey gums are a gum-barked eucalypt, mostly smooth but they also have texture brown patches, like a brindled pelt. Their glossy dark green leaves are large and lace-shaped with a visible central vein. Grey gum leaves are koalas' favourite. (Simpson 2017, p. 26)

[6] See: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/.

[7] Gagliano's research deals with the ecological mechanisms by which living things are able to collect messages on the changing circumstances of their landscape in order to flourish. For more information, see: https://www.monicagagliano.com/.

[8] Robert is a sensory biologist whose interests involve the evolution and usage of analytical techniques for determining nanoscale vibrations in biological organizations. For more information, see: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/biology/people/daniel-robert/biography.html.

Like a botanist, Simpson studies the world of plants, the different structures that they originate during their life cycle (flowers, seeds, etc.), as well as the organisms that interact with them (such as animals). Her knowledge embraces anatomy, physiology, evolution, taxonomy, biodiversity, ecology, and the sustainable use of plants. Specifically, she explains to the reader the adaptation and diffusion capacity of the various species based on the terrain and climates, suggesting the necessary care for their maintenance and conservation. The narrative shapes the perspective of the language of trees.[9] Inga exquisitely details the life of our Australian bushland by dividing the memoir into three "layers" that allow the ecosystem to flourish: Canopy, Middlestorey and Understorey. In the field of ecology, this subdivision is generally known as "stratification" and is referred to describe the vertical layering of a habitat. The classification of vegetal strata depends on the different heights to which their plants grow. In addition, the singular layers are characterized by a variety of flora and fauna. The structure of Simpson's eco-memoir follows a kind of circular movement which starts from the tree leaves and arrives to the vegetation beneath the forest, showing how important the circle of life is. The Circle of Life is in fact the cycle of existence of all living beings, a natural path made of birth, growth and aging, until the day you leave this world. This cycle implies that each creature is connected to each other, forming a delicate balance that must be constantly protected by taking care of the environment too.

5. Concluding remarks

This study of Inga Simpson's *Understory: A Life with Trees* supports the relevance of literature in addressing the current environmental and cultural crisis. Reading Simpson's eco-memoir based on Eisler's biocultural partnership-dominator paradigm, and Monica Gagliano and Stefano Mancuso's studies on plant biology, clearly demonstrates that only through a deep knowledge of the environment is it possible to promote respect and appreciation for biodiversity. As a creature of the forest, Inga walks among the trees, sharing her care for all living beings, whereas the outside world threatens this harmonious relationship. Moments of rapture in nature are for Simpson short-lived as she is deeply aware of how fragile and precious this balance is.

The environmental message of her work emerges from the way she describes how nature operates, how "trees survive, adapt and endure", and what happens when human beings interfere with its delicate ecosystem. Simpson's *Understory* not only voices her concerns for the ongoing global ecological crisis, but also powerfully exposes the consequences stemming from the lack of care and indiscriminative exploitation which can only lead to a natural and social catastrophe.

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[9] See: https://newtownreviewofbooks.com.au/inga-simpson-understory-life-treesreviewed-tracy-sorensen/.

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