Inga Simpson's *The Last Woman in the World* as a Transmodern Fiction of Attention[1]

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Abstract:
This article studies *The Last Woman in the World*, Simpson's apocalyptic novel set in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory shortly after the Black Summer and the coronavirus pandemic, as a transmodern fiction of attention. In *Contemporary Fictions of Attention: Reading and Distraction in the Twenty-First Century*, Alice Bennett looks into how literature is responding to the challenges to traditional forms of reading in the digital era by probing new areas. She analyses a growing corpus of international fiction that has attention, in its many forms, as its centrepiece. Bennett's research, in combination with the theory of transmodernity, will serve to narrow down the focus to what I call "transmodern fictions of attention," with Simpson's cautionary tale as clearly representative. The essay argues that transmodernity constitutes the first light of a paradigm change that emphasises the vulnerability and radical interdependence of all forms of life, underlines the importance of the everyday and the staples of being human—most evident in dire situations—and promotes a relational ethics of care and attention that transcends the Levinasian call to attend so as to encompass not merely humans but the environment as well. The analysis intends to reveal that these are not new insights. On the contrary, the novel illustrates the reassessment and revaluation of Indigenous thought worlds encouraged by the transmodern paradigm.

Keywords: ethics of attention; ethics of care; transmodernity; Emmanuel Levinas; Indigenous relationality.

1. Introduction

Inga Simpson's fourth novel *The Last Woman in the World*, published in 2021, is an apocalyptic story set in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory shortly after the mega bush fires of the Black Summer and the COVID-19 pandemic. Rachel, the main character, lives a secluded life in the wilderness until the arrival of Hanna, a young woman looking for help for her sick baby-boy, Isaiah. Hanna brings news of a mysterious plague instantly killing people around Australia that partly conjures up and partly overshadows the effects of the coronavirus. Everyone in her hometown seems to have died. Despite Rachel's initial disbelief and her reluctance to abandon her home, they set out on a journey in search of her doctor sister that reveals the magnitude of the threat. Not just Australia, but the whole world is haunted by hordes of shadowy fear-feeding creatures endowed with the ability to infiltrate thoughts and cause death on the spot. Surprisingly, Rachel and Hanna will find out that only those protected by oxytocin, also known as the love hormone, or the few that succeed in keeping fear at a remove, are better equipped to evade destruction. As a breastfeeding mother, Hanna's body produces oxytocin naturally, while Rachel takes the synthesised hormone to help keep her anxiety at bay.

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By contrast, escaping the grip of fear demands a constant effort and finely honed attention skills. At the close of the novel, Rachel's capacity to attend has proved to be crucial to her survival and that of the baby-boy, whereas the mother falls victim to snipers in the outskirts of Canberra in trying to trace her partner. It is also patent, right from the onset, that attention in Simpson's novel goes beyond its most basic meaning of 'taking notice of' to include the decision to take care of oneself and others.

This synopsis reveals that *The Last Woman in the World* brings to the forefront the complexities and the richness of the concept of attention in the present times, not yet a century and a half after William James sketched out its importance in *The Principles of Psychology*. Famously, James defines attention as

> the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others. (404)

In fact, the study of attention has of late aroused widespread interest among scholars in its original field of psychology as well as in other disciplines. Some, such as Maggie Jackson, express the need to reclaim attention as the cure for the mounting distractions of the digital era and acknowledge the negative impact a fragmented mind has on relationships. The current inattention crisis, Jackson affirms, has made people "less and less able to see, hear, and comprehend what's relevant" (22) and, at the same time, more reluctant to subordinate themselves "to a greater good" (31). According to her, what is more necessary than ever "in a time of growing mistrust and seemingly expendable relations is honesty, unhurried presence, and care" (30), all depending, she believes, on a focused form of attention. Likewise, Yves Citton's "ecology of attention" elucidates the collective nature of our capacity to attend. On the one hand, it helps us adapt our behaviour to the environment by filtering the phenomena that interest us, whilst, on the other, it aligns "our sensibilities and our preferences with those of others" (34). Thus, for Citton, attention serves a double personal and social purpose that enables the construction of "communities of sensibility and action" (34).

Attention takes different but interconnected forms in *The Last Woman in the World*: the perception of inner and outer processes, the trigger of awe in the presence of beauty, the concern for the natural environment and, above all, the prerequisite to care and commitment. Jackson's wake-up call to attend alongside Citton's relational conception of attention are forced upon Rachel from the very moment she opens the door of her home to Hanna and Isaiah. Their journey through the apocalyptic landscapes of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory provides further opportunities for attention, especially in the form of solidarity, caring and love. This article aims to cast light on Simpson's novel by putting it in conversation with Alice Bennett's work on the role attention plays in present-day fiction. In *Contemporary Fictions of Attention: Reading and Distraction in the Twenty-First Century*, Bennett studies a growing corpus of international fiction that has attention, in its many manifestations, as its centrepiece. The current turn to attention is, she states, a response to the challenges to traditional forms of reading in the digital era. As it did before in the teeth of changing circumstances, the novel is turning possible threats to its existence as a genre into opportunities for probing new areas. Bennett argues that "rather than presenting an incapacitating blow to literary fiction … the distractions of the digital age have become the spur for new writing that is freshly alert to

attention's vagaries and fragility" (4). Certainly, Simpson's novel testifies to the rising fascination with attending to attention in literature Bennett explores.

Bennett's approach, which seeks to correct "the dominant cultural narrative of a lost age of attentive reading" (11), is multifarious and comprehensive. Her contemporary fictions of attention range from investigations into the positive side to distraction and inattention, to those works which gently nudge their readers into reflecting on their own capacity to attend (4). I will here mostly draw on her insights into contemporary fictions that posit attention as a form of ethics and encourage responsibility in a globalised world (12). More precisely, these works regard attention as "caring-for or waiting-on" (15). As the author puts it, "the attention that one gives to the other … becomes an act of ethical decision-making" (16). My main point in this article is that this group of fictions Bennett singles out blend especially well with the emerging paradigm of transmodernity and its other-oriented mentality.

Transmodernity is the first light of a paradigm change redressing the radical scepticism and the solipsism characteristic of the postmodern mentality (Ateljevic 38, 39). According to scholars such as Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, Marc Luyckx Ghisi and Enrique Dussel, transmodernity entails a revisitation of modernity and its ethical drive. In the words of Rodríguez Magda, it is "a fluid return of a new configuration of the previous stages" (2011, 8; my translation). The prefix 'trans-' she explains, denotes both connecting—in the background of a globalised world—and transcending in order "to create new values, new realities" (2011, 7; 2019, 29; my translation). Although transmodern scholars do welcome the hygienic function of postmodern anti-universalist critique, they also perceive the pressing need to salvage some regulative ideals that they deem necessary for navigating the crises of the contemporary world (Rodríguez Magda 2011, 7). As Jeremy Rifkin puts it, "while the human spirit was freed up from old categories of thought, we are each forced to find our paths in a chaotic and fragmented world that is even more dangerous than the all-encompassing one we left behind" (5). Thus the urgency to identify what Eric Prieto calls "bedrock values," and put them in dialogue with "the material and social challenges of our era" (4). This new cultural paradigm in the offing highlights the vulnerability and radical interdependence of all forms of life, focuses on the staples of being human—most evident in dire situations such as the one described in Simpson's novel—and promotes a relational ethics of care and attention. At the roots of transmodernity, there lies a turn to ethics via the experience of trauma that underlies the importance of caring relations. Modernity's emphasis on individualism, self-sufficiency and autonomy is being replaced by a growing awareness of radical relationality and the consequent responsibility for the human and the "more-than-human world" (Abram). Luyckx, paraphrased by Ateljevic, describes transmodernity as a "*planetary vision* in which humans are beginning to realise that we are all (including plants and animals) connected into one system, which makes us all interdependent, vulnerable and responsible for the Earth as an indivisible living community" (41; original emphasis).

In view of the synergies between contemporary fictions of attention that advocate the need for an ethical engagement and the theory of transmodernity, it seems pertinent to establish a distinct subcategory of works that I suggest labelling 'transmodern fictions of attention.' Simpson's *The Last Woman in the World* will be analysed as a case in point. Read as a transmodern fiction of attention, the novel showcases the current bond between attention and ethics, which results in a reassessment of the value of care. In transmodern fictions of attention, attention constitutes a generative force that ties perception inextricably with care. Along the lines of transmodernity,

caring flows naturally from the realisation of the ontological vulnerability of all forms of life, be they human, animal or vegetal. This realisation extends, as well, to their essential interdependence. In this light, *The Last Woman in the World* champions attention as ethics and upholds a transmodern ethics of care that broadens the ethical regard to encompass not only humans but also the natural environment.

2. The Ethical Call to Attend

Without a doubt, the words that open the prologue of Simpson's novel are an unsolicited call to attend: "They knocked again, louder this time" (2021, 1). After years of cutting off bonds with the outside world due to a nervous breakdown, Rachel is unwilling to let in the two strangers at her doorstep: "It had taken some doing, fortifying the old cottage against the world. Whoever it was would probably go away if she stayed quiet" (2). As happens in the face of traumatic experiences, Rachel's first reaction is denial: "*This isn't happening*," she thinks (2; original emphasis). Emmanuel Levinas, the proponent of ethics as first philosophy, the philosopher of the constitutive commitment to radical alterity, the engine of the ethical turn that fuels transmodernity, can be drawn upon to cast some light on Rachel's reluctance to attend the call. In his preparatory study *Existence and Existents*, Levinas is concerned with the condition of the solitary subject. He pinpoints a kind of weariness much in keeping with the main character's shape, a weariness of "everything and everyone, and above all a weariness of oneself" (1978/1947). There is, however, an existential drive to answer the call that is not easy to resist. Levinas asserts that, in spite of the subject's wish to abstain from acting, commitment to existence prevails. "The obligation of the contract with existence," he states, "remains incumbent on us and it animates the need to act and to undertake, makes that necessity poignant" (1978/1947). In the philosopher's later work, this obligation to engage with existence is fleshed out as an infinite demand to attend to the other (1996/1962, 18), a demand prompted by the encounter with what he seminally calls "the Face":

> The Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility … Responsibility for the Other, for the naked face of the first individual to come along. (2003/1984, 82, 83)

The opening pages of *The Last Woman in the World* reflect Rachel's inner struggle and how she finally gives in to the ethical call to let the stranger and her baby-boy in. In her case, responsibility for the other gains the upper hand and proves Levinas's insights to be right. Most notably, it is at this particular moment that the character's attention is translated into a meaningful action which sets the plot in motion. In this way, attention comes to be a crucial causative factor, the productive power that enables the story to unfold.

It is especially noteworthy that the two-page prologue functions as a prolepsis of the ethical call to attend, spotlighting its significance. In the external narration, two sets of sentences stand out. Firstly, those featuring Rachel's inner self-talk, highlighted in italics: "*Move. This time—you have to act*" (1). Her command to herself is a clear nudge out of her comfort zone that reverberates with Levinas's theory. Secondly, we find Hanna's plea, the first instance of direct speech in the text: "I know you're in there. Please—help" (2). In a reversal of chronological order, some pages into the novel Rachel is startled by the first knocks at her door (13). They are followed by some words uttered by Hanna: "My child is sick" (14). The knocks and the voice are embedded in the description of the protagonist's daily routines. She works molten

glass into beautiful vessels (5-7), prepares lunch out of home-grown vegetables, brews herself some tea and bakes bread. Routine actions soothe her and she feels safe (13). Weirdly anticipating what is to come, she is confident that "if the world ended tomorrow, she'd be fine" (13).

The urgent knocks and the call for help rupture through Rachel's sheltered existence and press a heavy demand on her attention. Bennett's quoting from Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, together with her gloss, is pertinent here:

> the other is "the Stranger that disturbs the being at home with oneself." The other interrupts and disrupts the self when it is at its most comfortable, most homely and self-contained. The stranger is a disturbance or a distraction—a knock on the door that attracts our attention and requests that we open up. (127)

In fact, Levinas's ethics of radical alterity is the pillar on which Bennett's analysis of attention in Zadie Smith's work rests. In Smith, she concludes, attentiveness is inseparable from responsibility and minding for the other. It is Levinas's idea of the self as always already a "hostage" to the other that Bennett is most interested in. Unlike the tenets of Aristotelian ethics, which present the self as "a free moral agent that answers appeals from the self" (122), for Levinas, the self is constituted "*through* the appeal from the other—an appeal that is foundational" (122; original emphasis). The image of the self as hostage is powerfully evoked in *The Last Woman in the World.* Albeit Rachel's pull of resistance—the first words she utters in the novel are a command to Hannah to go away (14)—she can no longer ignore the stranger's plea: "there were two people outside who needed her help" (16), she admits. It is very significant, in the light of Levinas's theory, that it is the vision of Hannah's suffering face through the peephole that prompts Rachel's decision to let mother and baby in: "the woman's face was wracked with something—something real. … Rachel forced herself to slide back the bolt and turn the deadlock" (16).

The journey the characters undertake as a result of Rachel's yielding to the ethical call to attend provides a good opportunity for studying attention through the lens of transmodernity. In the following section, attention will be investigated as an anchor to the everyday and the staples of being human in the midst of catastrophic circumstances. The centrality of care for one another and the concern for the state of the natural environment confirm the novel's alliance with the transmodern mentality. *The Last Woman in the World* fully emerges as a transmodern fiction of attention because of its triangulation of ethics, attention and care.

3. Transmodernity: Attention as Care

Three defining aspects of the transmodern paradigm are uncovered along the characters' journey: the relevance of the everyday and the commonalities of existence, the promotion of an ethics of care and the extension of empathy to the natural world. This section connects them through the common thread of attention, with Rachel as the main attending subject. Prior to emotions, care and commitment, the capacity to attend turns out to be critical in navigating the apocalyptic scenarios of the novel. My thesis is that in transmodern fictions of attention such as *The Last Woman in the World* careful attention to the ordinary acts as the portal to ethical engagement, the ethics of care is first an ethics of attention and Levinas's summons to attend to the other does not only apply to the human neighbour but includes the realm of nature.

Throughout the narrative, Rachel's focus oscillates between inner and outer processes of attention. Typically, from the early pages, she practices a form of attention akin to mindfulness: "Only now, the task right in front of them,… clearing thoughts from her mind, existing only in each moment" (148). The main character is depicted as anchored in her body and often engaged in self-care routines. A suicide attempt in the past is hinted at, after which her doctor sister had taken her under her wing and taught her meditation and breathing techniques (28). This equips Rachel with the ability to attend to her own attention, an ability that becomes crucial when under attack by the disembodied creatures wreaking havoc around the characters. In contrast to the ghostly creatures, Rachel's is definitely an embodied form of attention: "Rachel was present, in her body" (107). Besides, peripheral vision is shown to be especially useful (106, 254), as looking right at the shadowy monsters boosts their power to feed on your thoughts. Rachel explains to Hannah that "if you don't look right at them, they're there. Shadows. Kind of" (162). It seems that, echoing the effect of sunlight on seeds, the entities we consciously resolve to attend to are made to grow by our perception. The fact that the creatures prey on people's capacity to attend suggests that, on occasion, an economy, rather than an ecology, of attention is needed and that one must carefully choose what or who to pay attention to.

Nevertheless, despite the decidedly unusual nature of the events featuring in Simpson's speculative story, the emphasis on the everyday must also be acknowledged. Attention to the ordinary and to the staples of human existence strongly underpins Rachel and Hannah's journey through apocalypse. In *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture*, Andrew Epstein defends that the crisis of attention brought about by the new technologies and the mass media has, since the mid-1990s, "given rise to an increasingly powerful desire to reconnect with daily life" that he labels "everyday hunger" (42). Similarly, among her contemporary fictions of attention, Bennett detects a set of novels which pay "close attention to the fine detail of the ordinary" (22) in whose ranks *The Last Woman in the World* can be accounted. Indeed, Rachel's skill in perceiving the fine grain of life, honed by her being a glass artist, provides psychological stability to her fractured self, ensures subsistence in the midst of life-threatening difficulties and allows her to reach out to others.

In the spirit of transmodernity, in *The Last Woman in the World*, Simpson chooses to highlight the very basics of living, that is to say, providing for the body and its needs, especially protection, rest and nourishment. The transmodern paradigm is characterised by a return to the staples of human life and experience rather than by purely ideological and identitarian concerns. In the novel, there are several scenes that show Hannah breastfeeding her baby and Rachel providing food for the adults, first at her home, as a basic principle of hospitality, but mostly in the course of their journey. These scenes are described in great detail and are very sensory: at home, "she boiled water for the pasta, fried off onion, garlic and fresh chilli. The smells and sounds reminded her that she had been hungry" (25-26). Rachel also searches for supplies during the journey. The apocalyptic context enhances the primacy of what ensures subsistence. She reflects: "They would have to go further and further to find food. Take more risks. Having everything they needed on hand was the most basic requisite for survival" (157). Sometimes, Rachel enters deserted, unattended supermarkets so as to stock up on provisions for the journey (156). Others, nature appears as a bountiful provider, reciprocating her attentiveness to the environment. River mussels, warrigal greens, river mint and cress cooked in the billy make for a tasty, nourishing en route meal (63, 64, 75).

Rachel's attentiveness to the commonalities of existence opens up an essential dimension which features prominently among the traits of transmodernity: that of relationality and interdependence, derived from the ontological vulnerability of life. The simple fact of existing makes living beings vulnerable to illness, injury and death and, thus, dependent on each other. In *The Last Woman in the World*, the allusions to prior pandemics and lockdowns (42, 171, 256) bring to mind the historical event of Covid-19 and testify to both the dangers and the need for human connection. It is true that the other can be infectious, but it is equally true that the indispensability of care makes complete isolation both practically impossible and obviously undesirable. The inescapability of human bonds is evident from the very beginning of Simpson's novel, since Rachel's feeling of self-sufficiency is revealed to be false. Despite her efforts at isolating herself from the world, she still depends on a character called Mia to bring in goods and deliver her glass work to customers. Her sister Monique also spends time with her once in a while and keeps her informed of major events such as the Covid pandemic. Meaningfully, it is the need to check out on her and to look for medical aid for Isaiah that finally pushes Rachel to leave the shelter of her home and venture on a dangerous journey.

That there is a continuity between attention and care has been noted by several critics. Bennett mentions Bernard Stiegler and Teresa Brennan, who, she says, "have made an overt connection between the act of caring for and the act of attending to" (113). The work of Sandra Laugier and Silvia Caprioglio Panizza also concerns attention understood as care. In their view, attention, even in its most basic meaning of sensory perception, establishes the basis for other-oriented responsibility. "*Attention* is part of the meaning of care," Laugier states (230; original emphasis), and the way we choose to live depends on our "*vision* of what is important (what matters) to us" (222; original emphasis). Both the ethics of attention and the ethics of care dismiss abstract, universal principles in favour of the concrete and the familiar (223, 236). In a similar vein, Caprioglio maintains that "attention is concrete … and engaged. … Attention is directed at reality and, specifically, at an individual reality: not 'people', not 'animals, not 'nature', but *this* person, *this* animal, *this* blade of grass" (2; original emphases). In *The Last Woman in the World*, the connection between attention and care, in all its particularity, is fully disclosed in the relationship between Rachel, Hannah and Isaiah during the journey. Rachel and Hannah provide for each other's physical and emotional needs and together they look after the baby. They need to be particularly attuned on the occasions in which they must fight the ghostly creatures. The message that human connection matters is reinforced when they guess that oxytocin, the love hormone, serves as a protection against attacks (299).

But, how does attention as care measure up when in the company of the few survivors the main characters meet on the way? As Bennett rightly notes, there must be certain limits to the circle of our attention. She analyses how contemporary fiction engages in testing the extent of our responsibility with respect to strangers and people from far-away places (120-123). According to her, fiction is "uniquely placed to invite readers to consider the distances their sympathy, compassion or attention will span" (120). *The Last Woman in the World* does not flinch from testing the boundaries of attention as care. Early in their journey, the characters realise that paying attention to other people makes them more vulnerable to the attack of the creatures since they gather strength from each person they take (58). The bigoted logic of "stranger danger" might be thought to underpin the women's reaction. However, their refusal to help is, above all, a form of self-preservation in exceptional circumstances. The following conversation between Hannah and Rachel makes it clear that not helping others does not come naturally to the characters but is forced upon them by the sorry state of affairs: "'we had no choice, you

know. … We did well to get away.' Rachel nodded … But that didn't make her feel any better. Or stop the recurring thought" (60). The extent of the characters' obligations and the limits of their attention understood as empathy are curtailed by their need to survive and find help for the baby. Again, the story uncovers the existence of a hierarchy of attention that nuances the Levinasian imperative to attend and forces the characters to discriminate. At the end of the novel, the fact that Hannah is shot dead by a sniper in Canberra endorses their need to protect themselves from dangerous others (276-277). Rachel ends up assuming the role of caretaker and decides to go back home with Isaiah. Her encounter with a man and his little daughter before she finds shelter once more in her bush home might be interpreted as a hint, if only remote, at the re-establishment of community bonds (336-337).

Arguably, *The Last Woman in the World* is a proof that in transmodernity we are witnessing an extension to nature of the Levinasian summons to attend. The emphasis on the embodied quality of attention rather than exclusively on mental processes facilitates the bridging of the gap between humans and the environment. "Respect for Mother Nature," as a matter of fact, is a central concern of the transmodern mindset, Luyckx believes (40). And what is more, over and above a caring attention to the natural world on the part of humans, transmodernity recognises the agency of the more-than-human realm and its mutual capacity to attend. Most remarkably, this organic, all-embracing conception of attention culminates in the erosion of the dualistic gaze, dominant since the 16th and 17th centuries, which posits nature as different from and subordinated to humankind. Simpson's novel engages in these issues through the attitude of its protagonist towards the natural milieu.

Rachel is a keen observer of the environment. The observation of nature grounds her and often fills her with awe. Her attention is drawn to the beauty that still remains in the landscape (6, 59, 100): "'It's beautiful,' Rachel said. She had looked at the mountains nearly every day of her life. They were part of who she was—or who she wanted to be" (75). At some points in the narrative, she feels her heart "heavy with the suffering of the land" (80) and wonders whether the deadly creatures the world must face are not a result of human interference with nature: "I hope we didn't do this, unleash something terrible on the world" (100). It is important to note that the disastrous 2019-2020 bushfires make up the immediate past of Simpson's novel and picture a world ravaged by the climate crisis. Coincidentally, the author had to be evacuated on two occasions while finishing the first draft. In the words of Lars Jensen, "climate change and environmental damage will hit Australia harder than any other 'developed' nation" (3). To a great extent, he blames it on the settlers' way of managing the land and their disregard for the much more respectful practices of Indigenous Australians (6, 11). Jensen considers the Black Summer as "a manifestation of climate change in full swing" (16). In the novel, the bushfires are constantly in the mind of Rachel in the form of vivid memories:

> The fires had torn right through the valley, roaring and leaping through the canopy, almost to the back of her place … Another ten minutes and she would have lost everything. Not that any of that would have mattered, not compared to what had been lost. Billions of trees and animals. (49)

Another related aspect Simpson's novel shares with transmodernity is its attention to Indigenous peoples. This concern goes alongside the questioning of the exclusivity and full validity of Western-centric knowledges (Luyckx, 40). According to Dussel, transmodernity reappraises "that which has been … devalued and judged useless among global cultures,

including colonized or peripheral philosophies" (514). This is by no means unproblematic due to the long and painful history of cultural appropriation endured by Native and Indigenous communities worldwide. Well aware of her tricky status as a "a fifth-generation descendant of white settlers" (2017, xi), Simpson is careful when demonstrating an interest in Indigenous knowledges and ways of being in the world. For instance, in her memoir *Understory: A Life with Trees*, she admits the danger of appropriation at the same time that she shows her appreciation for Indigenous vocabulary, more in tune with the local fauna and flora:

> 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. (2017, 194)

Her words read like an intuitive grasp of Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong's remark on Indigenous philosophies of language: "Language was given to us by the land we live in" (qtd. in Cariou, 340).

In *The Last Woman in the World*, the protagonist's concern for the land reverberates with Indigenous Australians' relationship to the natural world, embodied in the phrase "Care for Country." Bright provides the gist of their understanding of land management: "It is part of our responsibility [to look] after our country. If you don't look after country, country won't look after you" (59). On occasion, their spiritual bonds with the landscape are evoked in the narrative: "Sometimes [Rachel] liked to ask the forest for an answer. When in doubt about whether she should climb the final summit of a mountain of spiritual significance to Yuin peoples, she had asked the land, the old people, the mountain itself" (37). In the same way, Rachel and Hannah show familiarity with and respect for Indigenous cultures, as the following conversation demonstrates:

> "Local creation stories say it was a platypus who travelled through here, up to the escarpment, and made all the tunnels and galleries."
> "We had a Yuin elder at the library every week, to tell a story or read a book to the school groups. The kids loved that one the most," Hannah said. (75)

The calling into question of the supremacy of Western civilisation runs in parallel with the reconsideration of anthropocentrism and its traditional opposition between nature and culture, the vital force of life, or *zoe*, and life as "the prerogative of Anthropos," or *bios* (Braidotti, 36). In line with holistic Indigenous philosophies, Rachel's loving attention serves to highlight the continuity between humans and the environment. Aboriginal scholar Vicki Grieves favours the term "wholistic" to describe Indigenous thought worlds and points out their belief in the interconnected quality of existence: "the elements of the earth and the universe, animate and inanimate, whereby people, the plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are interrelated" (7). She makes it plain that the practice of "sharing and caring" refers both to people beyond family and to the habitat (25). When in deep focus, the main character of Simpson's novel becomes open and "porous to the world" (15). Significantly, she does not only appreciate nature as something external to her; rather, she feels an integral part of it: "the forest was alive all around her and she was attuned to it with all of her being" (38). For her, humans are relational far beyond their fellow creatures. The Indigenous concept of "radical

relationality," as well as the ensuing ethos of life, is apposite: "radical relationality … helps us to understand our relations beyond kin to one of 'interdependency and respect among all living things'" (Martinez et al., 203). Rachel's openness towards people and nature acquires foundational tinges in the apocalyptic circumstances of the novel: "In whatever future there would be," she states, "past achievements were irrelevant. Only relationships—with other people, the earth" (167). Besides having roots in Indigenous wisdom, the radical relational approach the protagonist longs for resonates with the inclusivity of the transmodern mentality and stems from a form of attention essentially grounded in care.

4. Conclusion

Simpson's *The Last Woman in the World* confirms the pervasiveness of the representation of attention in contemporary fiction. Beyond this, it constitutes an important contribution to exploring the role of attention at both personal and environmental levels. This essay has followed in the footsteps of Bennett's study of the current turn to attention, side by side with the theory of transmodernity, so as to read the novel as representative of a distinctive line within the trend, namely, transmodern fictions of attention. These fictions hail Levinas's other-oriented philosophy, an early corrective to the excessive relativism of postmodernity, at the same time that they acknowledge the limitations of its ethical call to attend the human neighbour. As Simpson's novel shows, attention, understood as care, needs to be stretched out in order to cover not just humankind but also the more-than-human world. The analysis of Rachel, the main character, demonstrates that loving attention to detail is the foundation of the ethics of care and that being mindful of human needs paves the way for responsibly attending to those of nature. Transmodernity provides the appropriate framework for connecting attention to caring and surviving in the midst of crises. *The Last Woman in the World* is congenial to the emerging transmodern paradigm, with its emphasis on the everyday and the commonalities of existence, together with its concern for relationality beyond the realm of the human. Besides calling into question the tenets of anthropocentrism, this new ethos, as illustrated by Simpson's work, encourages the revaluation of ancient Indigenous philosophies, victims of Western arrogance and inattention. Their radical relationality bespeaks connection, interdependence and reciprocity, inescapable certainties that Rachel apprehends through her capacity to attend, sharpened in the doomsday situations of Simpson's work.

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