

Ecofeminism and creative marginality: an alternative geometry of education

Ecofemminismo e marginalità creativa: una geometria alternativa dell'educazione

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

The conception of human identity that we have inherited from history generally seems to be based on the dualistic thinking that has long characterized Western culture. Cartesian dualism, through numerous symbolic associations, has contributed to the devaluation of women and nature. In light of this, the theoretical and activist thought of ecofeminism aims to promote a new geometry of thought—one that sees the transcendence of dualistic conceptions between society/nature and man/woman as the only possibility for the future of knowledge. Often considered a peripheral issue, ecofeminism today establishes itself as a primary site of engagement in discussions on gender and cultural politics. This contribution pursues the suggestion of an ethical and theoretical paradox, arguing that the issue of ecofeminism might indeed be left “at the margin”—if we understand marginality as resilience, sharing, and the development of collective strategies: a counter-space to pause and rethink different ways of living in the world, within the world.

KEYWORDS

Ecofeminism, dualism, marginality, compassion, resilience.
Ecofemminismo, dualismo, marginalità, compassione, resilienza.

La concezione dell'identità umana che abbiamo ereditato dalla storia sembra generalmente basarsi sul pensiero dualistico che ha a lungo caratterizzato la cultura occidentale. Il dualismo cartesiano, attraverso numerose associazioni simboliche, ha contribuito alla svalutazione della donna e della natura. Alla luce di ciò, il pensiero teorico e attivista dell'ecofemminismo mira a promuovere una nuova geometria del pensiero, che considera il superamento delle concezioni dualistiche tra società/natura e uomo/donna come l'unica possibilità per il futuro del sapere. Spesso considerato un tema periferico, l'ecofemminismo si afferma oggi come luogo primario di confronto nei dibattiti sulle politiche di genere e culturali. Questo contributo raccoglie la suggestione di un paradosso etico e teorico, sostenendo che la questione ecofemminista potrebbe effettivamente restare “ai margini” — se si intende la marginalità come resilienza, condivisione e sviluppo di strategie collettive: uno spazio di contro-narrazione in cui sostare e ripensare differenti modi di abitare il mondo, dentro il mondo.

Citation: Arsena A. (2025). Ecofeminism and creative marginality: an alternative geometry of education. *Women & Education*, 3(5), 46-51

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Conflicts of interest: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflicts of interest.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7346/-we-III-05-25_09

Submitted: March 21, 2025 • **Accepted:** May 24, 2025 • **Published:** June 30, 2025

Pensa MultiMedia: ISSN 2975-0105 (online)

1. Brief review on a “marginal” and “side” issue

The relationship between women and the environment is fundamental, and it has been scientifically discussed since the 1970s (D'Eaubonne, 1974). It is rooted in the broader dimension that links the exploitation of the female body to the exploitation of the environment (Griffin, 1978). The scientific discussion that investigates this complex and articulated field of relational and political phenomenology is called ecofeminism.

Often considered as a marginal or peripheral issue, ecofeminism imposes itself today as a primary place of belonging to the discussion on gender and cultural policies (Mies, 1986).

In reality and paradoxically, the question of ecofeminism could be left “on the sidelines” if we understand the expression in the same terms intended by the African-American feminist intellectual bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins), who in her text *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics* (1990) dealt with the theme of marginality in a new and original way, i.e. as a space for creation and not for submission. According to bell hooks, marginality and the periphery (conceptual, geographical, cultural) is a place that opens new possibilities of homesteading, and therefore it is a residence place, rather than a transit avenue while waiting to reach the centre.

Marginality therefore is resilience, sharing, elaboration of collective strategies, a counter-space where one can stop and rethink different ways of experiencing the world within the world.

In the space at the margin the individual and the collective dimensions are articulated. Action and thought are made by continuous shifting of scale: from the local to the global one, deconstructing the dominant systems and structures (Lopez, 2023).

The margin is a place from which to emerge proudly, showing that even from numerical or logistical inconsistency it is possible to emerge and speak.

The margin is a place from which to impose oneself according to the philosophy of the underdog, where those who are underdogs or disadvantaged emerge and impose themselves unexpectedly.

In this sense, then, the link between feminism and defence of the environment is established precisely on the axis of marginality.

It is no coincidence, moreover, that the first reflection on the connection between the world of women and the natural environment is attributed to an American scientist, namely Ellen Swallow (1842-1911) from whose biography a significant fact emerges: she was the first woman admitted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

An only woman, therefore, in an exclusively male environment.

The first woman to emerge from the margin.

In 1892 she coined the term “ecology” in its current sense, intending with this concept the whole dimension that surrounds human beings and which concerns the consequences of life on Earth. This is an important clarification, because «ecology» (in the sense intended by Ernest Haeckel in 1866) meant only the scientific study of the world external to human beings and which is not influenced by them (Merchant, 2003, p. 1053). By calling into question the consequences of human life in the expression ecology, Ellen Swallow posed an important fundamental question because she dragged all human beings, men and women, into this vital dimension for the first time.

It is precisely here that the interest of feminist thought around ecology arises because the crucial question immediately revealed itself: just as the Earth has been exploited by men for centuries, in the same way women have been exploited by male domination.

In other words, ecofeminism studies the interweaving of domination relationships dictated by gender, class, species and all the connections between all forms of life on Earth.

According to Karen Warren (2000), any feminist theory and any environmental ethics that fails to take into account the interconnection between the domination of women and nature is, at best, incomplete, and at worst, simply inadequate.

The strong bond between women and nature is established in the theoretical structure of ecofeminism and it takes on positive and liberating connotations: ecofeminism calls for a reversal of traditional roles for the benefit of greater gnoseological and anthropological awareness.

Ecofeminism fights epistemic oppression in the first instance, i.e. the overbearing attitude of those who speak in the name of others and in the place of others, passing on the sole knowledge considered legitimate and worthy of being listened to.

Ecofeminism fights epistemic violence and the colonality of knowledge and culture, giving back the voice to nature which has so far remained silent, like a woman next to the domestic hearth.

Ecofeminism therefore involves acquiring a profound awareness of origins, of the present and of the future, to enter into a full and profound connection with every single plant, animal and human life, forming a single speaking body with the planet, to conquer forms of power hitherto never exercised. A new matriarchy (against the prevailing patriarchy) which also and above all includes Mother Earth.

Dealing with power means, in the logic of ecofeminism, overthrowing power itself, practising decolonial exercises on the privileges exercised hitherto by the monolithic and monocratic male logos.

After all, one of the advantages of power is precisely that of overthrowing power itself, mobilising it as an in-

strument of resistance and subversion within the dominant system, unhinging the ancient disciplinary divisions and, in some way, overturning the disciplinary normometer. In fact, until now, in academic discourse the scientific nature of a text (and therefore its truthfulness) was given only by a presumed objectivity, or by the ability to “disappear” behind the text, making sure that one’s presence is not glimpsed behind one’s own words.

This is not the case in the field of gender studies, feminism and above all transfeminism: when these topics are studied, one begins from the awareness that every knowledge and every discourse, every logos and every topic, is situated knowledge (Haraway 1988), and therefore we begin from the awareness that every research is part of one’s life, of one’s existential situation. In fact, in feminism, one writes about oneself (Duran, 1991).

In this sense, feminism consists of an always transgressive and situated writing that calls into question a new and disruptive element in the cold, achromatic, insensitive and aseptic scientificity: that is, it introduces the emotion, the pathos and the experience of the writer and of those who read. The co-participation, making explicit one’s emotions, one’s desires and one’s condition is not only an alternative way of understanding scientific knowledge, but it is an act of protest, of resistance, of open hostility to Cartesian, binary thinking, to Western and Eurocentric rationality which often is the harbinger of violence (Bordo, 1987). Ecofeminist research is based on a decolonial epistemology capable of breaking down disciplinary and cognitive walls, placing the female body and the earthly body at the centre, as vehicles for relationships, emotions, passions, suffering and, finally, redemption (Clough, 2003).

The epistemic *leitmotif* of knowledge in modernity has been built around keywords such as progress, evolution and development: they have been internalised and have built a single way of representing the world and a single way of understanding how to think ourselves in the world. All knowledge has been constructed in binary terms of development and underdevelopment, with the former serving as a paradigm for the latter. Not only that: in order to legitimise itself, the hegemonic system has the need to create a sacrificial discourse (Andrade, 2018) according to the idea that the poverty and suffering of some subjects are a necessary sacrifice, a tolerable side effect inevitable for the good operation of the system.

Exploitation of many places on Earth, deforestation, pollution, anthropization have been understood as “necessary” practices for the development of only one part of the world.

Just as Saint Augustine, in line with ancient patriarchal thought, affirmed that the exploitation of the female body is a “necessary evil” for the good existence of society (Bristow, 1983).

2. Towards a critique of all dualism

In short, Western knowledge has so far legitimised colonial and phallogocentric forms of knowledge: Cartesian thought is based on binomials such as culture/nature, good/bad, I/other, man/woman.

The first term was granted the privilege of defining the being and essence of the world and of things. Rights, speech and emotions were taken away from the second term.

It is very difficult for Western thought to redeem itself from closed and colonial binary categories.

Instead, ecofeminism embraces the decolonial proposal that calls into question male Cartesian and sometimes ego-centric thinking. According to Houria Bouteldja (2016), in fact, the Cartesian ego was born as a male and conquering ego, a white and “armed” ego. When the Cartesian ego emerged in the history of Western philosophy, the West had discovered America by little more than a century. Descartes writes from Amsterdam, the navel of the Western world. If we contextualise the Cartesian ego, it can be seen that it is a predatory, conquering ego, intoxicated by its political and economic victories. Descartes speaks of the will to conquer the world and nature and to conquer the centre. *Cogito ergo sum: I think therefore I am* and I am the one who decides, submits, plunders.

I think therefore I am the white, virile, capitalist, imperialist man.

Instead, ecofeminism embraces epistemological creativity which, aimed at the deconstruction of every binary and colonial reference, embraces a philosophical and practical project that feeds on diversity, pluralism and pluriversity. It aspires to the construction of different points of view from which to start different and equal worlds and to multiply the places of logos and enunciation.

Ecofeminism builds a non-homogeneous, non-binary and non-categorical but plural world, a sort of epistemic archipelago, a structure of multiple constellations starting from the singularity, from one’s positioning and from one’s single existence.

Ecofeminism radically shifts the focus away from the Anthropos, expanding the scope of inquiry to include non-human objects and subjects. Here, the traditional distinction between human life (*bios*) and non-human life (*zoe*) is erased, thereby making a multitude of entities related to *zoe* the new parameters for defining today’s posthuman subjects. In doing so, a new egalitarian ecological politics is initiated, based on the respect for *zoe*, that is, for non-humans, as an alternative to universal human rights (Braidotti, 2023).

Ecofeminism aspires to build a kaleidoscopic world that allows us to see new realities, without centres and without peripheries, starting from the singularity of every human being in all its declinations and emotions.

The intersection between feminism, ecofeminism, and intersectional feminism is located in the cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption that both female and animal bodies endure daily. This cycle begins with objectification, reducing bodies to mere meat, subject to sexual violation or death, treating them as mere objects. This leads to fragmentation, where the whole body is dissected into parts, as seen in advertisements that focus on isolated body parts of women. This fragmentation results in depersonalization and the loss of individual identity. Ultimately, these fragmented bodies are consumed: literally in the case of animals and metaphorically for women, through pornography tailored for the male gaze. This cycle is further entrenched by language structures that obscure and institutionalize male dominance and exploitation.

3. Compassion to deconstruct ancient geometries

In ecofeminism, an important role is assumed by responsibility and care so that the ancient patriarchal paradigm, which has led to male development understood as male development in the life of women and nature, is reduced: the 1988 text of the Indian physicist Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive*, uncovered the consequences of a scientific reductionism that is based on the violent fracture between women and men, between mankind and nature, generating inequality, domination, poverty. With the “maldevelopment” the forest is separated from the river, the pasture from the forest, the animals from the crops generating and spreading death.

As Donna Haraway (2003) explains, science and philosophy project a distorted gaze onto nature which serves to justify an ideology: the idea of humanity as unbound from nature and from animality, and the idea of woman as something detached from humanity. In other words as female sexual subjectivities we do not believe we have ever been human. The theme of women has always appeared as an unconventional theme, characterised by a constant of abnormality and this is how it has been experienced in Western thought. Particularly in philosophy, women are constantly associated with profane phenomena, with unruliness, and depicted as subhuman and intolerable to the eye (think of the power of the tradition linked to witchcraft which has condemned to death women considered “irregular”: widows, orphans, poor, or women capable of healing with herbs). It is as if the woman is associated with something that makes her inclined to be an enemy of humanity, an outsider of the civilization of which she is also a part, an alien.

Ecofeminism questions the relationship between human beings and the responsibility of a science and a technology which, entirely male, in the hermeneutic of the environment often do not see the substantial fallibility of their interpretation which leads towards destruction. Ecofeminism is a movement for the liberation of nature from male oppression and for the liberation of women from male's excessive power. It leads to the awareness that there can be no liberation nor can there be a solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships is that of the dominion. Women need to unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the environmental movement to propose a radical reorganisation of fundamental socio-economic relations and revise the values of modern industrial society (Ruether, 1975, p. 204).

Evelyn Fox Keller's 1985 contribution entitled *Reflections on Gender and Science* in fact asks how much of science is tied to the idea of masculinity and what it would mean for science if it were not. Her acute analysis starts from the critique of two fundamental stereotypes that act in the relationship between women and science: the first is the one that makes objectivity coincide with masculinity and subjectivity with femininity, the second is the one that identifies science as a human activity devoid of values and emotional connotations.

According to Alicia H. Puleo (2011), in science as in fiction, males usually imagine a strengthening of patriarchy, while female and feminist authors seek and find substantial empathy and compassion with nonhumans and experience the breakdown of gender roles as the feminism is an emancipatory thought capable of inspiring and promoting new liberating critical developments that bring us closer to the horizon of a culture of peace.

It is therefore clear how the ecofeminist imprint differs considerably from the male one just as the feminist ethical thought on the environment and animals differs considerably from the classical western ecoethics. As stated by Donna Haraway (2003), it is necessary to apply other perspectives to rethink the dilemma that the ecological debacle, the economic precariousness, and the crisis of our political and family systems pose to us. The ethical and political relationships of ecofeminism create possible worlds, while coordinating the activity in the present and the challenge of possible sustainable futures, mobilising resources that have remained unexplored, among which there are certainly new ambitions and a new aspirations, and leave behind the dialectical scheme of thought crossed only by a binary logic. The sustainability of the future is based on the ability to mobilise, actualise and deploy cognitive, affective and ethical forces not activated so far. These driving forces materialise themselves in actual and physical relationships that may form a network, a texture, a rhizome of interconnections with each other. Feminist eco-ethics is based primarily on empathy, on the ability to feel and of mutual listening, while maintaining a constant perception of self. (Donini, 1990, p. 239).

The experiences of women and feminists are a reflection of the plurality of multiple moral interests: the female gaze poses the problem of the importance of the context within a decision-making scheme; it tends to combine different interests in a non-adversative way and to regard people as moral agents characterised both by their relationships and by their bodies. It is no coincidence that, despite movements in defence of animal rights and of nature are full of female activists, it happens that - as in many other fields of culture and science - theories and paradigms are made by men, and they are the recognized thinkers with intellectual authority. Academic sexism creeps into this shift where the thinkers who theorised about animal ethics and ecology did so through abstract ideas that defined real ontological boundaries. However, feminist thinkers do not see these borders (if they exist) as a justification for abuse or exploitation. We are still on the first pages of this new story sanctioning a new alliance between women and the world: over the centuries, after all, the female gaze has been excluded from scientific reflection.

From these premises, probably, ecologism is born, namely the exasperation of a single position in the reflection on ecology. Ecologism (which is not ecofeminism) looks a lot like a secular form of Clericalism or the concentration of all authority, all power, all sacredness in the hands of men who are invested with divine authority.

This necessarily creates a dynamic whereby power tends to simply want to replicate and defend itself. In the moment in which a (scientific) priestly caste has been created over the centuries, it is natural that this then has as its primary purpose that of self-preservation and of preserving only the most aggressive part of scientific reflection, i.e. unlimited development. This monocratic thought is structurally incapable of understanding the Earth as a living organism that must rather be protected and safeguarded and not just exploited to the last resort.

Ecofeminism is in fact a plural, rather than monolithic, thought; it is by its nature multicultural and inclusive through the analysis of the women-nature connection and through the analysis of the interconnection of all social systems of domination such as racism, classism, ethnocentrism, imperialism, colonialism and discrimination with respect to age, emotional preferences, and so on.

Ecofeminism takes different cultures into consideration, binds them to itself and binds them to each other (Warren, 2000) in the awareness that life on Earth is a network of interconnections and that there is no natural hierarchy. Hierarchy, any hierarchy, in fact is a creation of patriarchy which is projected onto nature and used to justify an oppression which may be again and again sexual, social, racial and so on. Therefore, on a theoretical level, ecofeminism tries to show all the connections between the various forms of domination. Its essence is non-hierarchical and among the various currents of thought, ecofeminism is the most inclusive. In fact, one could say that in the analysis of oppression made by socialists, feminists, animal rights activists, etc. the same pattern has always prevailed: distinctions have always been made between oppressor and dominated groups, following an exclusionary paradigm and not fully grasping the complexity of domination. All other theories have in turn created new categories of otherness, allowing for the perpetuation of an oppositional way of thinking. Sexism, racism, classism, speciesism, androcentrism are systems of oppression that reinforce each other and lead to the degradation of life and the destruction of nature. What oppressed groups have in common – women, colonised peoples, the poor – is that each has been equated with nature, considered part of nature, outside the sphere of reason and history. The category of “nature” is primarily a political category.

Positioning oneself from a female point of view therefore does not reflect a desire for opposition, but rather that of observing and interpreting the world from another perspective, from below, from the margins, from the periphery. The gender perspective is the one that best allows us to lay bare the interweaving of domination relationships. Among white peoples, coloured peoples, the poor, children, the elderly, the colonised and other human groups threatened by environmental destruction, it is those of the female gender who face the greatest risks and suffer the incomparably greatest damage, compared to those belonging to the male gender (Warren, 2000, p. 2). Domination over women is an emblematic model that becomes the paradigm of every other form of domination because the oppressed, all the oppressed, are both feminised and naturalised (Plumwood, 1993). Patriarchal conceptual frameworks, which have been the theoretical presuppositions of modern science and philosophy, are in fact characterised by hierarchy and by opposing dualisms: high/low, mind/body, reason/emotion, action/passivity, universal/particular, freedom/necessity, civilised/primitive, public/private, subject/object, where the first term is associated with men and is elevated, the second is associated with women and is devalued. The list could go on for a long time; every distinction can be treated as a dualism and become a real conceptual weapon that is constantly reworked and refined. Val Plumwood has focused on the nature of dualism in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Each dualism – writes the Australian philosopher – is connected to the others in such a way as to form a labyrinth of oppressive connections linked by a logical structure characterised by exclusion and negation.

In fact, dualism is not just a dichotomy or a hierarchy, which can be contingent and surmountable, but a way of thinking that makes equality and relationship unthinkable. A dualism is a relationship of separation and domination characterised by a radical exclusion not open to change. Religion, philosophy, science, cultural symbols, social models, sexual norms, education, the economy reflect this logic of domination which places the existence of men in the foreground and pushes that of women into the background, conceiving of it as non-essential, and without an end of its own (Plumwood, 1993, pp. 41-59).

Non-binary thinking is the premise that both ecofeminism and posthumanist philosophies have in common: it takes utopian thinking to survive the anthropocene, or capitalocene, and to build the future. This thinking must be feminist, even if the postmodernity does not allow for great stories and this makes its relationship a little difficult with utopia. Seyla Benhabib (1992) makes a very interesting reflection on this report, starting from the fact that feminism and postmodernity are not just descriptive categories: they are constitutive and evolutionary terms that inform and help us to define the present, designing ways of thinking about the future and evaluating the past.

The theoretical and practical path of ecofeminism and posthumanism starts from the full desire to re-define not only the world we live in, but also the very definition of human beings and what their role is within this world re-visioned with new eyes. The logic of Western thought is binary and dualistic, therefore necessarily anthropocentric and androcentric. Therefore for ecofeminism the crisis of Modernity (already experienced and that we are experiencing) is a joyful opening of new possibilities in which to build alternative solutions. Furthermore, it is an opportunity to highlight affectivity, empathy and compassion, since an arrogant vision of the world, of the human beings and of philosophy limits the possibilities of political transformation and of moral evolution. The myth of individuality and infinite progress hurts us and others, and prevents us from understanding the relationships of power and dependence that articulate the world. It prevents us from being free, and justice needs freedom. As Marta Tafalla (2019) writes, freedom is not attainable through the domination of the other, we get it when we assume our finiteness.

Freedom is not imposing one's identity on the world and wanting to see that things exist only in relation to us, it consists in respecting the different one (Ulivieri, 2023).

Freedom is not a monologue, it is a dialogue.

And a dialogue requires listening.

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