

The opposite of two: pedagogical implications in Greta Gaard's ecofeminist studies

Il contrario di due: implicazioni pedagogiche negli studi ecofemministi di Greta Gaard

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

This essay aims to explore the insights offered by one of the scholars who contributed significantly to the development of ecofeminist thought: Greta Gaard. Gaard's work has stood out especially for its deconstruction of the binary, exclusionary, and hierarchical logics that have governed Western systems. By adopting an intersectional and pacifist perspective, Gaard has critically examined the (over)structures that have traditionally polarized human and non-human, masculine and feminine, nature and culture, exposing their patriarchal consequences.

Drawing on queer, animal, and postcolonial studies, this essay focuses on the contributions that Gaard's ecofeminist approach can make to the creation of an educational paradigm committed to appreciating differences and broadening the possibilities for emancipation.

KEYWORDS

**Ecofemminismo, Greta Gaard, Intersezionalità, Dualismo, Pluralità.
Ecofeminism, Greta Gaard, Intersectionality, Dualism, Plurality.**

Il saggio intende prendere in esame le sollecitazioni provenienti da una delle studiose che ha contribuito allo sviluppo del pensiero ecofemminista: Greta Gaard. Gli studi di Gaard si sono distinti soprattutto in riferimento alla decostruzione di quelle logiche binarie, escludenti e gerarchiche che hanno governato i sistemi occidentali. Attraverso l'adozione di una prospettiva intersezionale e pacifista, Gaard ha criticato le (sovra)strutture che canonicamente hanno polarizzato umano e animale, maschile e femminile, natura e cultura, denunciandone le derive patriarcali.

Sulla scorta dei *queer*, *animal* e *post-colonial studies*, il lavoro intende focalizzare gli apporti che l'impronta ecofemminista di Gaard può conferire alla costruzione di un paradigma della formazione teso alla valorizzazione delle differenze e alla pluralizzazione delle istanze di emancipazione.

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1. Rethinking education through ecofeminist narratives

In contemporary education, there is an increasing demand for alternative pedagogical models that challenge traditional dichotomies and hierarchical structures. The legacy of Euro-Western thought has long been dominated by binary oppositions – such as human versus non-human, masculine versus feminine, nature versus culture – that continue to influence teaching practices and curricula (Butler, 2013). These oppositions are not only reductive but also tend to reinforce patriarchal worldviews in which humans are separated from and elevated above the rest of the natural world (Warren, 1990). Ecofeminism could be a useful lens for understanding the peculiarities of today's educational and environmental circumstances (De Vita, 2024).

Since their first appearance in the 80's, the purpose of ecofeminist studies has been to bring together environmental, animal, anti-racist and feminist perspective (Gaard, 1998, pp. 12-15). Pioneering works like d'Eaubonne's (1974), Griffin's (1978) and Merchant's (1980) have laid the groundwork for the constitution of ecofeminism as an academic and scientific field.

Ecofeminism, at its core, is a critical framework that explores the interconnections between the exploitation of both nature and women, situated within a broader context of patriarchal domination (Keller, 1985; Collard & Contrucci, 1989; Gaard & Gruen, 1993). Thus, ecofeminism challenges traditional binaries structures by revealing how these oppositions are not natural or inevitable, but socially constructed mechanisms that serve to legitimize unequal power relations.

The roots of the ecofeminist movement posit that all the living beings are interconnected with each other, creating a collective identity in which each member of the natural world is treated as equal.

Moreover, an ecofeminist perspective calls for an interdisciplinary approach that not only acknowledges, but also values the interdependence of ecological and feminist issues, advocating for an inclusive, transformative, and critically engaged pedagogy. This reimagining is not only theoretical but holds practical implications for how we educate future generations to think critically about power, justice and sustainability.

2. Gaard's opposition to binary logics

Focusing on the definition of ecofeminism is essential to recognize its commitment to environmental sustainability and social justice. The theoretical framework of ecofeminist studies aims to examine and integrate feminist and environmental approaches, revealing how the oppression of women and the destruction of the planet are strictly connected. Indeed, the potential for regeneration of both women and the Earth has been exploited by a capitalist and male-dominant culture for centuries.

A branch of ecofeminism argues that environmental degradation and gender oppression are intertwined through systems of domination that privilege a narrow, often Western-centric view of culture and progress:

[...] the way in which women and nature have been conceptualized historically in the Western intellectual tradition has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body, while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind. One task of ecofeminists has been to expose these dualisms and the ways in which feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the Earth (Gaard, 1993, p. 5).

This asymmetrical way of thinking is based on the assumption that capitalist culture establishes certain groups as more valuable than other groups. The more valuable groups are those at the top of the social pyramid because they control and legitimize power over the other members:

Alienation is followed by hierarchy, valuing self above other, and concludes by justifying the subordination of an inferior and separate other. This system of alienation, hierarchy, and domination is at work in all major structures of oppression in the West – sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, speciesism, anthropocentrism – and the features of the valued self in each system are associated, just as the features of the devalued self are associated: thus, “real” men are socially constructed as young able-bodied rational productive heterosexual meat-eaters, while women are seen as simultaneously irrational, sexual, animalistic, and reproductive (Gaard, 2012, p. 207).

Greta Gaard's ecofeminist perspectives provide a critical framework that not only interrogates these dualisms but also proposes new ways of understanding the relationships among various forms of difference. As she notes in reference to the definition of ecofeminism:

Did it mean women were somehow closer to nature – and if so, what were the implications for men? Did it mean women and nature had experienced similar treatment under patriarchal systems? Or did it mean women who were active in both feminist and environmental movements now had a name for their dual involvements (Gaard, 1998, p. 12).

Gaard's work deconstructs the conventional boundaries that delineate nature and culture, as well as masculinity and femininity. She posits that these dichotomies are not inherent truths but rather social constructs that serve as instruments of power: "By reconceiving the relations between nature/culture, male/female, and human/animal as continuities rather than opposed categories, feminist environmentalism *redefines what it means to be human*" (Gaard, 2012, p. 202).

Gaard's argument is supported by the recognition that environmental degradation leading to social injustice mirrors human relationships with the environment because they are inextricably linked: the relationship between the manner in which humanity engages with the natural world and the manner in which it engages with other humans is such that the two phenomena are inextricably linked.

In support of her theories, Gaard refers to the dualistic model developed by the Australian philosopher Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the mastery of nature* (1993). According to this model, the oppression of nature and human beings in Western culture is not only rooted in systems such as patriarchy, capitalism, or anthropocentrism, but also in a network of oppressive structures that collectively reinforce each other, resulting in a series of dualistic hierarchies:

Transcendent dualism itself presumably did not appear in a social vacuum; did it produce inferiorisation of the spheres of women and nature? Or were the foundations already present in the inferior treatment of women, nature and inferior social groups such as slaves? Are women inferiorised because of identification with the female sphere? Or are we faced with a set of interlocking structures of domination which mutually evolve and reinforce one another, in turn both aiding and drawing strength from the conceptual structure of transcendent dualism? (Plumwood, 1986, p. 123).

Gaard elucidates that Plumwood's findings demonstrates how the oppression of nature by Western culture is founded on the identification of the male self as dominant. This identification, in turn, through the supremacy of reason over empathy, becomes disconnected from the categories associated with nature, including women, the body, emotions, reproduction, poor people, people of color, and queer individuals. As Gaard pointed out:

In their analyses of oppression, socialists, animal liberationists, ecologists, and feminists each distinguish between privileged and oppressed groups, where the privileged are upper- or middle-class, human, technologically and industrially "developed," male, and the oppressed are poor or working-class, nonhuman animal, "undeveloped" nature, and female, respectively. Ecofeminism describes the framework that authorizes these forms of oppression as patriarchy, an ideology whose fundamental self/other distinction is based on a sense of self that is separate, atomistic (1993, pp. 1-2).

Historically, the masculine has been identified with rationality, while the feminine with empathy. Empathy is understood as the ability to feel with another, along with a commitment to social, ecological and species justice. Indeed, the notion of empathy evokes a profound sense of embodiment and interbeing with all the living beings.

By recognizing the interdependence of all forms of life and the interconnectedness of various oppressions, Gaard's ecofeminism offers an intersectional pathway toward more equitable and sustainable practices that challenge existing hierarchies.

3. Integrating Queer, Animal, and Postcolonial Perspectives

At the core of Gaard's ecofeminism is the interrogation of binary oppositions. Among others, her holistic and "critical" approach draws from the integration of queer, animal and postcolonial theories which challenge conventional assumptions about identity and difference (Gaard, 2010; 2017). This intersectional vision underscores the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of all forms of life and challenges the biases that have long dominated human and environmental discourse (Crenshaw, 1989; Gaard, 1997).

Since its first appearance, the objective of queer theory has been to challenge cultural frameworks beyond gender and sexuality, proposing that any stable, universalizing category can serve as a tool of exclusion (Burgio, 2012; Di Grigoli, 2023). By critically deconstructing these norms, queer theorists underscore the potential for a radical rethinking in the way Western culture has conceptualized identity, power and eventually nature and pedagogy (Russell, 2021).

Greta Gaard's essay *Toward a Queer Ecofeminism* (1997) is widely regarded as a pioneering work in the field, as it was the first to demonstrate the interconnections between ecofeminism and queer theories:

[...] I am arguing that a careful reading of these several movements of domination – the persecution of women through the witch burnings, of nature through science, and of indigenous peoples through colonialism – which reached a peak during the same historical period in Western Europe, will lead to the roots of an ideology in which the erotic, queer sexualities, women, persons of color, and nature are all conceptually linked (p. 132).

Furthermore, Gaard's integration of animal studies and postcolonial perspectives contributes to the enrichment of ecofeminism by underscoring the parallels between the marginalization of non-human entities and the subjugation of women and other oppressed groups such as Black, Indigenous and colored and poor people:

A queer ecofeminist perspective uncovers the ways that nature is inextricably linked with not just the female, non-white, non-human animal, but also with the erotic, such that liberation efforts for LGBT equality, feminism, and environmental health will be more effective if they are undertaken with an understanding of these interconnections (Gaard, 2012, p. 210).

Indeed, ecofeminist and postcolonial studies have a shared critique of hegemonic power structures that exploit both the environment and marginalized communities, especially in former colonial contexts (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015). Several studies have demonstrated that integrating these perspectives can elucidate the manner in which environmental crises and colonial power dynamics mutually reinforce each other, thereby exacerbating gendered and racialized inequalities (Gaard, Estok & Oppermann, 2013; Mies & Schiva, 2014; Burgio, 2021). Bruna Bianchi emphasizes these inequalities referring to the concept of patriarchy: "Patriarchy is not an idea, an interpretive category, but a system of power relations that treats women and people of color as resources, the same ideology that plunders nature" (2012, p. XVIII).

Likewise, ecofeminist and animal studies are both committed to examining how those systems of power encompass both gendered oppression and the exploitation of animals. Researches draw on foundational texts such as Carol J. Adams's *The sexual politics of meat* (2024) to highlight the intersection of ecological degradation and species-based oppression.

In a similar way, by integrating feminist insights into the sphere of animal advocacy, Gaard's scholarship underscores the necessity for an ethic of care that foregrounds relationality and mutual flourishing by highlighting the ways in which gender, species, and ecology intersect:

Using standard feminist methodology, twentieth-century vegan feminists and animal ecofeminists challenged animal suffering in its many manifestations (in scientific research, and specifically in the feminized beauty and cleaning product industries; in dairy, egg, and animal food production; in "pet" keeping and breeding, zoos, rodeos, hunting, fur, and clothing) by developing a feminist theoretical perspective on the intersections of species, gender, race, class, sexuality, and nature (2013, pp. 595-596).

Building upon the broader critiques of patriarchal and speciesism structures explored by earlier scholars, Gaard's work has contributed to the development of a more nuanced understanding of the interconnected nature of ecological and social injustices by challenging the prevailing assumptions about the isolated nature of the exploitation of women, nonhuman animals, and the environment. Her emphasis on dismantling dualistic thinking – where nature and nonhuman animals are often regarded as resources – has significantly influenced subsequent discussions on ecological justice, positioning ecofeminist perspectives as integral to advancing more comprehensive approaches in Animal Studies.

4. Conclusions

Gaard's integration of queer, animal, and postcolonial perspectives has been shown to enrich ecofeminist discourse by highlighting the interconnectedness of various forms of marginalization. Queer theory problematizes normative assumptions about identity and desire, while animal studies question the rigid boundaries drawn between human and non-human life. Postcolonial critique, furthermore, exposes the historical and cultural dimensions of domination, thereby revealing how colonial legacies continue to influence modern power relations.

In educational settings, the incorporation of these studies can contribute to a comprehensive and critical "ecopedagogy" that challenges scholars' preconceived notions about nature, society, and self, thereby promoting an "awareness of individuals, small and large, in relation to the conditions of life, made up of fragility, interdependence between every living being and participation in that dense and complex network of ties and interconnections" (De Vita, 2024, p. 15).

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