

Ecological Regeneration. Envisioning Ecofeminist Utopias

Fantasticare utopie ecofemministe per transitare verso nuove partnership

Antonia De Vita

Associate Professor, University of Verona, antonia.devita@univr.it

Arianna Sechi

Research Fellow, University of Verona, arianna.sechi@univr.it



DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the framework of the Future Lab methodology, which structures future narratives in three temporalities – dystopian, utopian, and transitional within the present – we will focus on the pedagogical value of “ecofeminist utopias”, which enable us to envision new agreements for coexistence, partnerships, and interspecies alliances. We will explore feminist dystopias starting from *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood, and then examine feminist utopias by analyzing the literary proposals of the solarpunk movement and those of feminist science fiction. Practicing ecofeminist utopian narratives indeed holds significant pedagogical potential in enhancing imagination and encouraging transformative practices and visions of the future that are capable of regeneration.

KEYWORDS

**Feminist dystopia, Feminist utopia, Solarpunk, Ecofeminism, Future Lab.
Distopia femminista, Utopia femminista, Solarpunk, Ecofemminismo, Future Lab.**

Attingendo alla metodologia del Future Lab, che scandisce le narrazioni di futuro in tre tempi: un tempo distopico, utopico e di transizione nel presente, ci concentreremo sul valore pedagogico delle “utopie ecofemministe”, utili per immaginare nuovi patti di convivenza, partnership e alleanze interspecie. Esploreremo le distopie femministe a partire da *Il racconto dell’ancella* di Margaret Atwood per poi passare alle utopie femministe analizzando le proposte letterarie del movimento solarpunk e quelle del genere fantascientifico femminista. Fare esercizi di narrazioni utopiche ecofemministe ha infatti un senso pedagogico rilevante per nutrire l’immaginazione e incoraggiare pratiche trasformative concrete e visioni di futuro capaci di rigenerazione.

Citation: De Vita A., Sechi A. (2025). Ecological Regeneration. Envisioning Ecofeminist Utopias. *Women & Education*, 3(5), 41-45

Authorship: Il contributo è frutto del lavoro congiunto delle due autrici, tuttavia per l’attribuzione delle parti Antonia De Vita ha curato il 1 paragrafo e Arianna Sechi il 2, il 3 paragrafo è in condivisione.

Corresponding author: Antonia De Vita | antonia.devita@univr.it

Copyright: © 2025 Author(s).

License: Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).

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

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7346/-we-III-05-25_08

Submitted: March 29, 2025 • **Accepted:** May 24, 2025 • **Published:** June 30, 2025

Pensa MultiMedia: ISSN 2975-0105 (online)

1. Future Lab: Exploring Feminist Dystopias as a Starting Point

The future is in your hands, she resumed. She held her own hands out to us, the ancient gesture that was both an offering and an invitation, to come forward, into an embrace, an acceptance. In your hands, she said, looking down at her own hands as if they had given her the idea. But there was nothing in them. They were empty. It was our hands that were supposed to be full, of the future; which could be held but not seen
(Margaret Atwood, 1985, p. 46).

This article's analysis of ecofeminist utopias will be structured by drawing inspiration from the methodology of the Future Lab, which, over the past decade, has engaged numerous groups of people – particularly young generations – in envisioning possible futures beyond catastrophic narratives (Pellegrino, 2020).

The Future Lab, or Laboratory of the Future, is a discussion and debate modality introduced by Robert Jungk and Norbert Müllert (1987) in the 1970s, particularly within the environmentalist discourse on nuclear armament. Jungk and Müllert argued that the political sphere in that period was already conceived especially as a space for critically interpreting the present, yet lacking the ability to explore and imagine possible alternative scenarios. Their analysis challenges the main educational agencies and their cultural failure to take a step back from the present. To resist this trend, Jungk and Müllert proposed political elaboration pathways centered on the distant future, following three stages that can be summarized as follows: 1. *dystopia, critique, or catharsis* focuses on the expression of the daily sufferings and struggles of our present and, through them, it reconceptualizes the distortions of the social order. In this phase, the collective fears and catastrophism we experience are legitimized and made concrete. 2. *utopia or vision* explores utopian narratives of daily life liberated from the previously emerged alienations and distortions 3. *transition* emphasizes reflection on desirable futures, drawing on the possibilities and concrete actions required to achieve these visions. The framework proposed by the methodology of the Future Lab – dystopias, utopias, transition – will be employed in this article to shape our reflections regarding the hypotheses of coexistence and the new ethics of partnership.

Taking dystopias, the object of a vast literature, as our starting point, we highlight the significant role played by feminist productions, which have stood out in terms of prefigurative intensity within the genre since the 1980s. As a jumping-off point, we mention here a paradigmatic dystopia by Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which has also become a successful TV series. Atwood depicts an American, post-nuclear-catastrophe society turned into a totalitarian state founded on the control of women's bodies. The protagonist, Offred, is named after the man she belongs to, and is charged with ensuring offspring to the elite who dominate the fledgling state, the Republic of Gilead. In this future world envisioned by the Canadian environmentalist writer, a monotheocratic regime relies on the exploitation of the Handmaids, the only women who are still in a position to procreate after the catastrophe. Atwood's dystopia aims to highlight that, even in the most repressive state imaginable, women's desires and subjectivities will still manage to find escape routes from the most heinous forms of totalitarianism. Some fundamental cores of the feminist dystopian genre emerge in this particular dystopia, such as the control of women's bodies, the rise of totalitarianism, and the militarization of living within a post-catastrophe global setting.

The themes recurring in feminist dystopias find a compelling counterpoint in the topics addressed by feminist utopias, a genre also experiencing a successful revival. We will now engage in an exploration of utopian narratives within feminist science fiction and solarpunk literature.

2. Utopian Ecofeminist Narratives: Solarpunk and Feminist Science Fiction

A fascinating ambiguity has long marked the concept of utopia, tracing its origins to Thomas More's eponymous work (1516), which suggested two distinct interpretations of the term by playing on the dual meanings of the prefix: *ou-topos* (non-place) and *eu-topos* (good place). It is likely that More deliberately employed this enigmatic etymology to emphasize the inherent duality in the idea of utopia (Zorzi Meneguzzo, 2019), highlighting how a *good place* is ultimately a *non-place*, destined to remain merely an imaginary and unattainable ideal.

However, the belief that utopias can never be fully realized does not negate their transformative potential in relation to our reality. In fact, as Pellegrino points out, utopia functions as an "exercise of imaginary discontinuity from reality" (Pellegrino, 2018, pp. 26-27), underscoring how utopian narratives can be used to envision desirable futures. Indeed, utopias can inspire creative thinking and encourage practices that lead to real change. By nurturing the imagination, utopias supply us with ideals that shape our present aspirations, enabling us to believe that a better future is possible if we are willing to act on it.

The imaginative potential of utopias is particularly significant when applied to ecofeminism, which is concerned not only with recognizing patterns of domination and systemic inequalities on a theoretical level but also with

concretely exploring alternative ways of living grounded in practices of care (Sanz Alonso, 2018, p. 218). Utopias inspired by ecofeminist theories embody some of its core principles, such as “the value of diversity, interdependence, sustainability, cooperation, and renewal”, intertwined with “the lesson that all oppressions intersect, and that no one – human or animal – can be free unless we all are” (Vance, 1993, p. 134). Thus, ecofeminist utopias take shape in worlds where social and environmental justice prevail, rooted in recognizing and respecting the interconnections that bind living beings – both human and non-human – to the Earth.

Several examples of such utopian visions are vividly represented in feminist science fiction. Some of them consist in the realization of separatist feminist ideals, which are implemented through the description of planets, nations, or regions that, due to a series of events unrelated to the gender clash – as occurs in Monique Wittig’s *Les Guerrillères* (1969) –, have come to be exclusively inhabited by women. Numerous stories have been written about these female-centered worlds, typically beginning with the arrival of some men in the lands in question, who end up disturbing the well-established local order. A well-known example is Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915), which portrays an all-women society that, through parthenogenetic reproduction, has developed a social system devoid of war and inequality. Another notable example is Joanna Russ’s short story *When It Changed* (1972), a prequel to her famous feminist science fiction novel *The Female Man* (1975). The story explores the world of *Whileaway*, a planet inhabited exclusively by women who reproduce through the fusion of two female ova. Less widely known is the novella *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?* (1976) by Alice Sheldon, which envisions a future Earth where a virus has eradicated the Y chromosome, leaving 11,000 surviving women who turn to cloning as a means of sustaining the human species.

Despite the various weak spots of the feminist separatist ideology – such as its perpetuation of a binary view of gender, which is only faintly challenged in *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?* – narratives like those mentioned provide valuable insights into both the present and the future we envision, particularly in terms of the communities we hope to see realized. In fact, these three novels are united by their exploration of alternative worlds where power structures and gender roles are radically different from those in current Western societies, thus questioning established norms. Furthermore, these utopias often emphasize environmental sustainability: women-only communities tend to have a heightened awareness of the importance of maintaining a harmonious and cooperative relationship with nature, as opposed to patriarchal societies, which are based on domination and the exploitation of natural resources.

In other instances, literary utopias do not embrace separatism but rather represent what d’Eaubonne might call “planet[s] placed in the feminine” (d’Eaubonne, 1974, p. 222), societies where care and empathy – traditionally associated with women – become the guiding principles of ethics, education, and, more broadly, social reality. The idea that female socialization could be extended to all, involving men in reproductive labor, represents a utopia that seeks an alternative to a male-dominated world defined by control and oppression. Exploring these alternatives through the imaginative construction of communities committed to social and environmental justice is a defining feature of solarpunk speculative literature. This literary genre envisions a distinctive form of utopia – one that remains in a state of transition: solarpunk narratives typically depict future scenarios in which social, environmental, and/or political crises are still unfolding, yet the characters actively engage in collective efforts to bring about transformative change capable of resolving these challenges (Forni, 2023; Johnson, 2020; Sylvia, 2015). With an underlying tone of hope, solarpunk stories explore themes related to environmental sustainability, human solidarity, and respect for non-human animals. They frequently revolve around the presence or pursuit of self-sustaining economies, societies free from inequality in all its forms, the redefinition of gender roles and the traditional heteropatriarchal family structure, the conscious and ethical use of technology for the common good, and a widespread ethos of respect for plant life and non-human animals. In other words, “solarpunk is a chance to imagine what the future could be” (Johnson, 2020), offering us the opportunity to dream of the utopias we wish to see realized and, at the same time, to invent creative solutions that can bring us closer to them. In fact, utopian narratives precisely remind us that change is possible and that other paths do exist. This is likely the standpoint of Amihan, the young protagonist of Sigrid Marianne Gayangos’ short story *Galansiyang*, set in a future ravaged by environmental disasters. Amihan, the daughter of a storyteller and keeper of our world’s memories, struggles to find her own path in a society that forbids any “improper” thoughts or words to avoid conflict or imbalance. By the end of the story, the young girl envisions a future where she will “not have to shut down anything” and where everyone will have “all the words for all the improper thoughts, and just let everything out” (Gayangos, 2021, p. 96). Imagining the future she desires for herself and her community enables her to sustain a sense of hope and a creative openness to change. This is exactly how utopias empower us – they cultivate our ability to envision desirable futures and encourage us to take action in the present by implementing transformative practices.

We stood there, Katha and I, aware of our nebulous future, thinking of the many tomorrows that we would soon create (Gayangos, 2021, p. 97).

3. Ecofeminist Transitions: The Sense of Wonder and Interspecies Justice

To answer the question of what we are transitioning toward in our time, we examined significant items of feminist dystopias and utopias, investigating the lights and shadows of possible forms of relationships in the living system. Referring to Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), we brought up feminist dystopian perspectives that amplify some issues that already exist within our reality: the war scenarios, the rise of totalitarian regimes, and the upsurge of the crisis of patriarchy over women. A brutal system of absolute domination that casts life in shades of darkness and devastation. Feminist utopias, on the other hand, depict hypotheses of possible coexistence that transcend relations of domination. Solarpunk and feminist science fiction, in fact, promote visions of solidarity, care, and interdependence among living beings, fostering hopeful horizons in order to imagine a more livable and peaceful world.

Thanks to the dystopian and utopian polarities, we can return with a richer perspective to the ecofeminist transitions that are the focus of this article. To conclude, we want to address two crucial aspects of ecopedagogical and ecofeminist transitions: ecological regeneration through the sense of wonder (Carson, 1965) and interspecies justice (Deckha, 2013; Donovan, 2013).

The complex issue of ecological regeneration, from a feminist ecopedagogical perspective, reaches a defining turning point in the following question: how can we “heal the sick heart” (Candiani, 2021) and heal our suffering planet? How can we heal the disenchanted gaze? The answer might lie in focusing on attitudes and perspectives capable of regenerating the affective, emotional, and participatory dimensions that the feminine experience of wonder enables. Inter-being (Nhat Hanh, 1990) and affectively and emotionally healing in a landscape that is not ravaged and desolate but wide and vast are the contributions that come from the rediscovery of the sense of wonder experience present in women's reflection since the eighteenth century. Bruna Bianchi in *Ecopedagogia. Il senso della meraviglia nella riflessione femminile* (2021) traces a female genealogy of past movements, cultures, and artworks that have revealed paths beyond relations of domination in ways capable of re-generating the feeling of otherness in the living world.

Since the eighteenth century, women – as narrators, scientists, teachers, science communicators, and feminists – have clearly recognized the outcomes of the industrialization process. They have questioned how to relate to other forms of life and have explored the characteristics of children's imagination. Women, the first educators and creators of fairy tales [...] have also been the main authors of works of children's literature with pedagogical intent. This tradition, largely forgotten, is now being rediscovered and reinterpreted in light of ecofeminist theories and the deprivations that childhood faces due to environmental degradation and the destruction of ecosystems (Bianchi, 2021, pp. 11-12, trad.).

Bruna Bianchi underlines how these authors, standing back from a mechanistic view of nature as objective and neutral, became passionate advocates for a perspective that embraces the emotions and subjectivity of the observer's experiences. This attitude of involvement, where science incorporates emotional experience, offers alternative ways of knowing that are more respectful of natural balances. As naturalists, scientists, writers, and poets, these women practice the art of restoring mystery and beauty to the natural world, making it accessible also to young readers. They demonstrate the extraordinary openness of practicing our senses, which nurture and cultivate feeling, intuition, and imagination. A consistent thread throughout these authors' writings is the relationship between the oppression of women and children and the domination of nature, alongside the possibility of healing these relationships through loving and affectionate experiences that come through observing, listening, and receiving. Among the ecopedagogical perspectives on these authors, we are especially struck by the shared creative capacity emanated from a personal and vital relationship with the natural world. This approach, characterized by a sense of intimate belonging to nature, is strongly present in Rachel Carson, whom we can consider the mother of contemporary ecology. In her *The Sense of Wonder*, she writes:

Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. Whatever the vexations or concerns of their personal lives, their thoughts can find paths that lead to inner contentment and to renewed excitement in living. Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts (Rachel Carson, 1965, p. 64).

Rediscovering and regaining the lost capacity for wonder for poet Chandra Candiani (2021), as well, is the high road to healing a suffering humanity. An efficient poetic synthesis to unlock insights into nurturing relationships between humans and non-humans (Guerra, 2023).

In addition to caring for the natural world, we must turn our attention to those who inhabit it in our company. In fact, overcoming systems of domination also means acknowledging and valuing the connections that run through us and bind us to other animals. Our goal is to move beyond individualism, speciesism, and anthropocentrism, and instead transition toward a future defined by solidarity and interspecies justice. Ecofeminism plays a key role

in this process, offering a framework that allows us to perceive the intersection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of non-human animals (Gaard, 2012; Zambonati, 2012). Ecofeminist practices, therefore, promote interspecies collaboration, seeking to establish a coexistence based on care and respect. At the heart of this ideal lies the recognition of the deep, interconnected relationships we share with other animals. In this regard, Donna Haraway argues that all living beings – both human and non-human – are part of a shared humus, a compost made of different subjectivities that interact and transform one another in a fertile, generative way. The ecofeminist transition cannot ignore multispecies relationships; on the contrary, it must rely on them in order to «make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures» (Haraway, 2016, p. 57).

The combination of the sense of wonder towards nature and the theme of interspecies justice is perfectly summarized by the ecofeminist concept of partnership, which is based on recognizing non-human otherness – whether it pertains to nature or non-human animals – as subjectivity. This results in an ethical framework that states that “the greatest benefit for communities of human and non-human beings lies in a vital and mutual interdependence” (Merchant, 2012, translated). An ecofeminist transition requires the establishment of collaborative relationships grounded in a partnership ethic: this is the utopia we strive for.

References

- Atwood M. (1985). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Bianchi B. (2021). *Ecopedagogia. Il senso della meraviglia nella riflessione femminile*. Napoli: Marotta&Cafiero.
- Candiani R. (2021). *Questo immenso non sapere. Conversazioni con alberi, animali e il cuore umano*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Carson R. (1965). *The Sense of Wonder*. New York: Harper & Row.
- d'Eaubonne F. (1974). *Le féminisme ou la mort*. Paris: Éditions P.O.L.
- Deckha M. (2013). Animal Advocacy, Feminism and Intersectionality. *DEP. Deportate, esuli, profughe*, 23, pp. 48-65.
- Donovan J. (2013). Diritti animali e teoria femminista. *DEP. Deportate, esuli, profughe*, 23, pp. 100-122.
- Forni D. (2023). Solarpunk visions in youth fiction. The pedagogical utopia of Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind. *Education Sciences & Society*, 2, pp. 160-168.
- Gaard G. (2012). Feminist Animal Studies in the U.S.: Bodies Matter. *DEP. Deportate, esuli, profughe*, 20, pp. 14-21.
- Gayangos S. M. (2021). Galansiyang. In A. Dell, J. Eschrich (eds.), *Everything Change. An Anthology of Climate Fiction Volume III* (pp. 87-97). In <<https://climateimagination.asu.edu/everything-change-vol-3/>> (last visited: 23/03/2025).
- Gilman Perkins C. (1915). *Herland*. New York: The Forerunner.
- Guerra M. (2023). La natura dei luoghi. Rachel Carson, pettirossi e un senso di meraviglia. *Bambini*, 4, pp. 14-18.
- Haraway D. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. London: Duke University Press.
- Johnson I. (2020). “Solarpunk” & the Pedagogical Value of Utopia. *Journal of Sustainability Education*, 23. In <https://www.susted.com/wordpress/content/solarpunk-the-pedagogical-value-of-utopia_2020_05/> (last visited: 23/03/2025).
- Jungk R., Müllert N. (1987). *Future Workshops. How to Create Desirable Futures* (3rd ed.). London: Institute for Social Inventions.
- Merchant C. (2012). Partnership. *DEP. Deportate, esuli, profughe*, 20, pp. 34-52.
- More T. (1516). *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus de optimo rei publicae statu, deque nova insula Utopia*. Louvain: Jean de Colines.
- Nhat Hanh T. (1988). *The Sun My Heart*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.
- Pellegrino V. (2018). Le propensioni utopiche di una generazione precaria. L'ascolto attento delle aspirazioni emergenti. *Animazione Sociale*, 319, pp. 18-28.
- Pellegrino V. (2020). *Futuri testardi. La ricerca sociale per l'elaborazione del “dopo-sviluppo”*. Verona: Ombre Corte.
- Russ J. (1972). When It Changed. *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 43(6), pp. 669-683.
- Russ J. (1975). *The Female Man*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Sanz Alonso I. (2018). Ecofeminism and Science Fiction: Human-Alien Literary Intersections. *Women's studies*, 47, pp. 216-231.
- Sheldon A. (1976). Houston, Houston, Do You Read?. *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, 50(6), pp. 645-662.
- Sylva R. (2015). Solarpunk: We are golden, and our future is bright. *Sci-Fi Ideas*. In <www.scifiideas.com/writing-2/solarpunk-we-are-golden-and-our-future-is-bright/> (last visited: 23/03/2025).
- Vance L. (1993). Ecofeminism and the Politics of Reality. In G. Gaard (a cura di). *Ecofeminism: Women, nature, animals* (pp. 118-145). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Wittig M. (1969). *Les Guerrillères*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Zambonati A. (2012). Ecofemminismo e questione animale: una introduzione e una rassegna. *DEP. Deportate, esuli, profughe*, 20, pp. 171-188.
- Zorzi Meneguzzo L. (2019). Sognare: le potenzialità dell'assenza, tra bisogno, desiderio e utopia. *Gli Argonauti*, 160, pp. 103-119.