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Ecofemminismo, etica e giustizia sociale

Ecofeminism and Deinstitutionalization: Educational Practices and Visions of Care
Ecofemminismo e deistituzionalizzazione: pratiche educative e orizzonti di cura

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, there has been increasing effort to identify points of convergence between the principles of abolitionist feminism and the struggles of ecofeminist movements. The publication of *Golden Gulag* (2007) by Black feminist geographer Ruth W. Gilmore was a groundbreaking contribution, sparking a series of reflections on how the presence and persistence of carceral institutions harm both the environment and the lives and survival of women. This paper aims to reflect on the educational care practices that can be inferred from and suggested by the contributions of ecofeminist and abolitionist authors. Why is the horizon of prison abolition ecofeminist? What are the characteristics of educational practices shaped by a feminist, decolonial, ecological, and abolitionist perspective?

KEYWORDS
Prison education, feminism, abolition, educational care, ecofeminism.
Educazione in carcere, femminismo, abolizione, cura educativa, ecofemminismo.

La ricerca di punti di contatto tra le istanze del femminismo abolizionista e quelle delle lotte ecofemministe si è moltiplicata negli ultimi vent'anni. La pubblicazione di *Golden Gulag* (2007), di Ruth W. Gilmore, fu pioniera di una serie di riflessioni su come la presenza e persistenza delle istituzioni carcerarie avesse un impatto deleterio sull'ambiente così come sulla vita e la sopravvivenza delle donne. Il contributo intende riflettere sulle pratiche di cura educativa evincibili e suggerite dai contributi delle autrici femministe, ecologiste ed abolizioniste: perché l'orizzonte dell'abolizionismo carcerario è ecofemminista? quali sono le caratteristiche di pratiche educative interessate da una prospettiva femminista, decoloniale, ecologista e abolizionista?

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1. Introduction

What connects the struggles against the prison system and those for environmental justice is a shared critique of power, coercion, and exploitation. Marginalized people and damaged ecosystems are not accidental outcomes. They are the result of processes designed to maintain the survival of neoliberal states. Abolitionist geographer Ruth W. Gilmore has worked, both as a scholar and an activist, to trace the links between environmental exploitation and incarceration. She focuses especially on how these are shaped by *racial capitalism*[1] (Robinson, 1983). Gilmore offers the following definition of the abolitionist paradigm:

> Practicalities rather than metaphors determine the focus and drive the analysis, because the scope of prison touches every aspect of ordinary life. Thus, it is possible and necessary to identify all those points of contact and work from the ground up to change them. This ambition makes some people impatient, as well it should. Abolition is a movement to end systemic violence, including the interpersonal vulnerabilities and displacements that keep the system going. In other words, the goal is to change how we interact with each other and the planet by putting people before profits, welfare before warfare, and life over death. (Gilmore, 2014, p. vi)

The impact of punishment and prisonization affects many aspects of our material lives. As Gilmore writes, the shift concerns our intimate and social relationship with others and with the planet. Incarceration is ultimately about space – about division, separation and restriction. The institutional response to harm is based on exclusion: certain spaces in the world are reserved exclusively for people who have committed a crime. This exclusivity separates them from the rest of the world.

Their capacity to act, to relate, and to intervene is confined to a space that, in many countries, is smaller than what is considered necessary for a decent life. That space is enclosed by bars that form cages. These spaces are usually located on the outskirts of cities or in areas far removed from the everyday life of the rest of society - out of sight, out of mind (Benelli, Del Gobbo, 2016; Verdolini, 2022; Zizioli, 2014).

I take the example of the prison in Verona, the one I have visited most frequently. Before being relocated to the outskirts, it was situated in the historic center of the city, just a few steps from the Verona Arena and directly across from the courthouse. The structure, known as *il Campone*, was built between 1847 and 1854 as a military barracks under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which at the time governed the city. It maintained this function even after Verona was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy. Following World War II, *il Campone* was repurposed as a prison. It had a capacity of about 200 inmates. The windows of the detention spaces faced the street. Symbolically—and materially—the prison was part of the city. It was accessible. Justice and the execution of punishment were not hidden away. In 1995, at a time when political detentions from the *anni di piombo* were coming to an end and social detentions were increasing - due in part to the rise of neoliberal policies and the criminalization of the first waves of migration - *il Campone* was closed and handed over to private ownership. That same year, the new *Casa Circondariale*[2] di Montorio was inaugurated on the eastern outskirts of the city. This newly built prison, originally designed (but never used) as a high-security facility, came to be known as the "golden prison" (*carcere d'oro*) because of the exorbitant costs it incurred over nearly twenty years of construction. Even before the transfer of inmates took place, the cells—each approximately 13 square meters, including sanitary facilities—were already being equipped with two beds instead of one. Later, they held three, and today, four beds per cell. Currently, the facility has 335 official spaces, of which 17 are unavailable, yet it holds 604 incarcerated people.

One of the defining features of neoliberal states, writes Gilmore—drawing on Toni Negri—is that they have progressively embedded their own principles into institutional structures, ensuring that even socialist or social-democratic governments are compelled to maintain and reproduce neoliberal policies (2023). This is perhaps easier to observe in the United States, where over seventy percent of correctional facilities are privatized: prisons operate as businesses that have contracts with the state, and the state must guarantee a certain number of incarcerations to keep these businesses afloat. Justice becomes dependent on the market. In Italy, this connection is less explicit: resources for the management and maintenance of prisons come from public funding. Yet the logic of extracting economic, environmental, and social resources through incarceration is no less present. The history of the prison space in Verona, for instance, clearly shows how issues related to incarceration have been subordinated to questions

1 This concept was theorized by U.S. political philosopher Cedric J. Robinson to reinterpret the history of capitalism as fundamentally rooted in the extraction of social and economic value from people with marginalized racial identities. In his foundational work *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Robinson shows how racialization permeates all aspects and socio-economic layers of capitalism, just as capitalism itself is inherently shaped by racialization (Robinson, 1983).

2 A "casa circondariale" is a custodial institution within the Italian penitentiary system intended primarily for individuals in pre-trial detention or serving short-term custodial sentences (generally up to five years). These facilities are typically located in or near urban areas and are managed by the Department of Penitentiary Administration under the Ministry of Justice. Although originally designed for short-term or preventive detention, in practice many of those institutions today hold individuals at various stages and levels of detention, including those serving long-term sentences.

of economic resource allocation: investments made for the construction of a facility, delays that undermine its intended use, overcrowding (two beds in a cell designed for one person), peripheral placement, and its opening coinciding with the first waves of migration and the subsequent criminalization of undocumented entry into the country.

This example shows how carceral logics are not only spatialized, but deeply embedded in broader political, economic, and environmental structures. Abolition, in this context, is not just the dismantling of prisons, but the refusal of a system that sacrifices people and ecosystems for the sake of order, profit, and control. It invites us to imagine new forms of justice—rooted in care, interdependence, and the transformation of how we relate to one another and the planet.

2. Ecofeminism and Abolitionist Feminism: Points of Convergence

Ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, is a theoretical and political framework that emerged in the 1970s and gained renewed momentum in recent decades. Coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne, the term identifies a connection between the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment, both rooted in patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial systems of domination. Ecofeminism challenges the dualisms—man/woman, nature/culture, mind/body—that sustain hierarchies of power and justify the exploitation of both women and nature. Across its diverse strands, ecofeminism insists that environmental justice cannot be separated from social justice, and that any viable ecological future must be grounded in feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist critique. It is not merely a call for sustainability, but for radical transformation: a restructuring of the ways we live, relate, and organize care, resources, and power.

The ecofeminism we are referring to takes a clear stance against what Ouassak calls the mainstream ecological project—a project that does not aim to change the system, but rather to preserve the existing social order. It speaks a lot about protection, but never about liberation. It longs for a life as it was before climate change, before so-called demographic and migratory risks: "everything must change so that nothing changes" (Ouassak, 2023, p. 41). According to the author, this is because it lacks a framework that includes – or better, intersects – a critique of colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist power structures. She continues by asking: "We agree on solving the climate crisis, but from whose point of view and in whose interest? Do we want to save humanity as a whole, or only the wealthy, privileged white minority? What kind of ecology are we defending? An ecology that adds borders to borders, or one that seeks to tear walls down? (Ouassak, 2023, p. 43). Two questions raised by Ouassak help us demonstrate the necessary connection between ecological and abolitionist struggles. First, the ecological question must be understood by analyzing systems of oppression in their simultaneity (Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 1983), so that ecology does not become just another way of reproducing the current social order. Second, we must reflect on the walls - both material and symbolic - that hierarchize access to a livable and dignified life.

In the preface to the Italian translation of *Pour une écologie pirate. Et nous serons libres*, Ferrante and Cirillo highlight how the book foregrounds air pollution and police presence in the outer suburbs of Paris as symptoms of a politics of suffocation (Ouassak, 2023, p. 82). This is also the core concern of Achille Mbembe in his groundbreaking essay on the universal right to breathe. Mbembe reflects on how the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the urgent need to "reconstruct a habitable earth to give all of us the breath of life" (Mbembe, 2021).

Ferrante and Cirillo write that the right to breathe allows us to visualize, starting from the lungs, the layered order of oppression that weighs on marginalized bodies. They write:

> What makes the air unbreathable is underpaid labor in unsafe spaces, the anxiety of not knowing if your children will return home, the burning of waste under the noses of working-class bodies, the cementing of land, the toxicity of cheap, sugar-based food, the fear of being undocumented in European countries full of internal borders, the bombs and tear gas in a strip of land invaded by settlers, the five-square-meter rooms in neighborhoods with more residents than trees. Corals are suffocating in the sea, animals in factory farms, and people drowning in the Mediterranean (Ferrante, Cirillo, 2024, p. 7).

People in prison are suffocating too. Each of the causes of suffocation listed in the text can be connected to the everyday conditions experienced by those who spend part of their lives behind bars. This missing air has also become a symbol of resistance to institutional racist violence—most visibly after the murder of George Floyd and the collective cry of "I can't breathe." In 2024, 246 people died in Italian prisons, 91 of them by suicide (Ristretti Orizzonti, 2025).

These suffocations – material, symbolic, environmental – are systemic effects of intertwined regimes of punishment, racialized control, and extractive capitalism. Prisons, like polluted air or militarized borders, operate as technologies of exclusion and containment. To fight for breathable air, for liberated futures, means also to fight against the spaces and structures that render some lives disposable. The call for abolition is, at its core, a call to

reimagine justice beyond punishment, ecology beyond preservation, and care beyond protection. It is a call to dismantle the cages, tear down the walls, and build a world where breathing freely is not a privilege, but a shared and inalienable right. When we speak of equal rights and equal lives for all, we cannot exclude people in prison—those who have been excluded because they were deemed responsible for harm. If anti-racist, feminist, environmentalist, and anti-capitalist struggles do not include incarcerated people, they once again delegate to institutions and the state the power to grant well-being only to a select portion of the population.

3. Pedagogies of Abolition and Care

When, in 2017, Mariame Kaba was asked what it means to her to be an abolitionist, she responded that abolition is a long-term project aimed at creating the conditions for the dismantling of prisons, policing, and surveillance, while also building alternatives that can truly keep us safe without oppression. She added: "What you need to make those conditions happen, you have to be for addressing environmental issues, you have to be for making sure people have a living wage economically" (Kaba, 2021, p. 72). In this statement, Kaba clearly articulates the connection between abolitionist and ecological struggles. As she writes elsewhere: "Prison-industrial complex abolition is a political vision, a structural analysis of oppression, and a practical organizing strategy" (Kaba, 2021, p. 2). Similarly, Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines abolition as a method (Gilmore, 2023).

In the same spirit, ecofeminist thinkers and activists emphasize that ecofeminism is both "a forge of analysis and a new form of action" (D'Eaubonne, 2022, p. 369), aimed at a complete overturning of the social order—a process of mutation. D'Eaubonne refuses the term *revolution*, as it is a construct historically shaped by male actors; instead, she embraces *mutation* as a transformation of structures, including those that are internalized and embedded in thought. These thinkers help us understand abolition and ecofeminism not only as political programs but also as processes, postures, and forms of rootedness - practices of becoming that carry the potential for profound and sustained social change.

From this perspective, we can say that environmental education, when grounded in a critical understanding of racial capitalism, can become a form of abolitionist praxis. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues, the prison system should not be understood as a neutral space for containing deviant individuals, but rather as a "geographical solution to social and economic crises," orchestrated by a racial state in crisis (Gilmore, 2002, p. 16). This framing invites a radical shift in environmental pedagogy—from a model focused on conservation and individual responsibility to one that interrogates the structural conditions through which toxicity, extraction, and enclosure are produced and distributed. Gilmore highlights how women, particularly in marginalized communities, lead "everyday struggles against toxicities," advocating for clean water, livable neighborhoods, and public health, while simultaneously resisting "razor-wire fences" and other carceral logics disguised as safety (Gilmore, 2002, p. 19). These acts of resistance generate knowledge, practices, and solidarities rooted in care, place-making, and the refusal of disposability.

At the same time, speaking about an abolitionist pedagogy, as educator and scholar Bettina L. Love argues, the notion of *mattering* is essential - even, or especially, when *mattering* becomes difficult:

> How do you matter to a country that would rather incarcerate you than educate you? How do you matter to a country that poisoned your children's drinking water? […] How do you matter to a country that steals your land, breaks treaty after treaty, and then calls you a savage? […] How do you matter to a country that rips children out of the hands of their parents and locks them in dog cages for seeking a better life? (Love, 2019, p. 2)

Love asks these questions to call forth reflective educational practices—those that confront and dismantle the oppressive dynamics we enact and internalize. She offers the example of how student suspensions are often shaped more by racial profiling and bias than by actual behavior. Moreover, exclusion, suspension, and punishment are all part of what is known as the *school-to-prison pipeline*: the systemic disinvestment in education - both in terms of material resources and pedagogical care—that leads to a disproportionate risk of incarceration for youth from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds.

An abolitionist environmental education, then, teaches not only about ecological systems but also about the political geographies of power and difference that determine who breathes clean air, who drinks safe water, and who is caged. It calls for dismantling the systems—prisons, borders, polluting industries—that produce premature death, and for imagining ecologies of life that are inseparable from collective liberation. These theoretical insights take shape in concrete educational and political practices. In what follows, I highlight three key dimensions—accountability, scale, and commons—that help us rethink pedagogy as both an abolitionist and ecofeminist tool for collective transformation.

– Accountability against punishment. In abolitionist feminist thought, accountability is not a punitive process, but a collective, relational practice rooted in care, transformation, and responsibility. As Mariame Kaba argues,

real accountability "is about transformation; it's about making things right, and it's about preventing harm in the future" (2021). This approach reframes harm not as an individual failure to be punished, but as a social phenomenon that requires collective attention and healing. Within ecofeminist frameworks, accountability expands further to include responsibility toward ecosystems, non-human life, and the commons we inhabit together. Pedagogically, this means cultivating spaces where individuals and communities can learn to hold each other accountable without reproducing carceral logics – through dialogue, reflection, repair, and mutual support. In this sense, accountability becomes a form of radical pedagogy: a way of learning how to live together differently, beyond punishment and isolation, and toward shared responsibility and ecological interdependence.

– Scales. In Gilmore's work, *scale* is not a static hierarchy but a social process—something that is "fought over, transformed, and struggled for" (2002, p. 19). This insight has significant implications for how we think about education as an abolitionist and ecological practice. Teaching and learning do not occur only in classrooms, but across and through bodies, neighborhoods, institutions, and landscapes. The body becomes the first site of knowledge and vulnerability, shaped by material conditions such as pollution, confinement, or exhaustion. From there, pedagogy expands outward, engaging with the lived environment and its spatial hierarchies: the placement of prisons on urban margins, the unequal exposure to environmental harm, the policing of movement across borders. To educate across scales means to recognize how structural violence is experienced intimately, and how transformation must therefore operate on multiple fronts. An abolitionist environmental pedagogy does not isolate the "individual learner" but teaches from the entanglement of body and land, community and infrastructure, resistance and care.
– Commons. Silvia Federici's theorization of the *commons* offers a crucial lens for rethinking abolitionist and ecofeminist pedagogy. In her analysis, commons are not simply shared natural resources but collectively created spaces—material and symbolic—in which alternative social relations emerge. These spaces, often sustained through the labor and leadership of women, are rooted in cooperation, mutual care, and collective access to land, food, water, and knowledge. "By commons," Federici writes, "I mean resources collectively managed and social relations that are alternative to capitalist ones, based on cooperation and reciprocity rather than competition and profit" (2012, p. 3). Commons are not given; they are produced through struggle, self-organization, and collective imagination. As such, they are also pedagogical: they generate situated and embodied forms of knowledge through the very practices of communing – farming together, sharing care work, resisting enclosure. The pedagogical value of the *commons* lies in their capacity to teach a politics of interdependence and collective survival, rather than individual achievement or institutionalized discipline. For Federici, reclaiming the commons is inseparable from the feminist struggle against the privatization of reproductive labor, and it offers a living alternative to carceral and extractive logics. In this way, *commons* can be read as abolitionist educational spaces: laboratories of care, resistance, and autonomy that challenge both state violence and neoliberal ecological management.

5. Conclusion

As argued throughout this paper, abolitionist and ecofeminist pedagogies call us to imagine education beyond punishment, beyond neutrality, and beyond preservation. They offer tools to resist the interlocking violences of incarceration, environmental degradation, and racial capitalism. Teaching becomes a practice of liberation (Freire, 2018; Zizioli, 2021) – rooted in the refusal of disposability, and in the imagination of more just, breathable, and inhabitable worlds.

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