Women&Education

Ecopedagogia, pensiero decoloniale e sostenibile

# The future is ecotransfeminist, posthuman and decolonial (or it's not)

# Il futuro è ecotransfemminista, postumano e decoloniale (oppure no)

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ABSTRACT

Since social and environmental issues are deeply interconnected, the need arises for an intersectional approach both to understanding the oppressions on social groups and on the more-than-human, and to developing pedagogical and political reflections on these matters. Education for sustainable development is insufficient and problematic as it neither reveals nor deconstructs the root of the issue; it is necessary and urgent to start from the margins, to learn from Indigenous Studies, and to decolonialize knowledges and powers. Such an ecotransfeminist approach can be pedagogically applied through a posthuman and compostist education which – also through experiential contact with nature – promotes relationships of care towards human and more-than-human others.

KEYWORDS
Ecotransfeminism, Intersectionality, Decoloniality, Posthuman, Nature-based Experiential Education
Ecotransfemminismo, postumanesimo, decolonialità, educazione esprienziale in natura, intersezionalità.

Essendo le questioni sociali e ambientali profondamente interconnesse, emerge la necessità di un approccio intersezionale sia alla lettura delle oppressioni verso gruppi sociali ed entità non-umane, sia all'elaborazione di riflessioni pedagogiche e politiche a riguardo. L'"educazione allo sviluppo sostenibile" è insufficiente e problematica, perché non svela né decostruisce l'origine della questione; è necessario e urgente partire dai margini, apprendere dagli Indigenous Studies e *decolonializzare* i saperi e i poteri. Un tale approccio ecotransfemminista può essere declinato pedagogicamente in un'educazione postumanista e compostista che – anche attraverso il contatto esperienziale con la "natura" – promuova relazioni di cura verso l'altro da sé (umano e non).

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## 1. Introduction

Once again, we find ourselves writing yet another paper that begins with the statement: "In this era of multidimensional ecological, social, political crises…". Indeed, this is the reality: while redundant, it remains both necessary and urgent to discuss how to address the major challenges shaping the global present. Furthermore, addressing the issue represents an ethical imperative within the field of pedagogy, as an area fundamentally concerned with the future through taking care of the present.

The starting point of the present reflection is the recognition that the primary guiding document outlining the actions to be taken in response to the ecological crisis – the United Nations' *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* – is, in fact, deeply problematic. A closer and more critical reading reveals that the Agenda perpetuates anthropocentric and capitalist perspectives of domination, disguised as seemingly ecological solutions. The root of this issue lies in the very premises on which the entire programmatic document is based, namely, the concept of sustainable development (Kopnina, 2020). This is not a neutral or incidental choice; rather, it is a deliberate political decision. In this framework, ecological and social sustainability are inextricably linked to economic growth and profit. This emphasis on economic development is highly problematic and counterproductive, as it is precisely economic and industrial growth – along with the consequent increase in population, consumption, and demand for natural resources – which is itself the root cause of environmental degradation, since it has led to planetary biodiversity loss, climate change, and the depletion of natural resources (ibidem).

The triad upon which the *2030 Agenda* is built, commonly referred to in English as the "Three Ps" – People, Planet, Profit – is fundamentally flawed and contradictory, as without the Planet, neither People nor Profit can exist. It is therefore impossible to conceive sustainability as compatible with economic growth. Given that economic growth is the foundation of our current economic and power structures, dismantling this paradigm appears to be an essential condition for the survival of the planet and its inhabitants (ibidem).

From a pedagogical perspective, it is crucial to shed light on this contradiction in order to prevent education itself from perpetuating this unsustainable model. On the one hand, it is increasingly evident that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson & Žižek, cited in Fisher, 2009); on the other hand, however, it is both an ethical and pedagogical imperative to seek alternative, unconventional, and divergent pathways in order to envision possible futures and construct livable presents through a complete shift in perspective.

The fact that the proposed solutions coming from the "center" (institutional frameworks) – such as the *2030 Agenda* – prove to be so problematic only confirms the idea that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 1984). This necessary shift in perspective must, therefore, begin with a process of decolonization and "decolonialization"[1] – of territories, peoples, and knowledges. As bell hooks (1989) eloquently explains, it is the "margins" that can truly become radical spaces of possibility.

## 2. Inspiring manifestos and the need for decolonialization

Some of the most significant ecological reflections and struggles have emerged from the margins. The following discussion draws upon two important manifestos, both written by women who, in different ways, can be considered as marginalized.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1962) is often interpreted as a *manifesto ante litteram* of what we now recognize as environmentalist and ecological movements. A woman, a scientist, with a low socio-economic background, Rachel Carson was among the first to understand the large-scale damage that would result from the exploitation of ecosystems for productive purposes, especially regarding the massive use of pesticides in agriculture. Given the significant challenge her book posed to the economic system, and since she was a woman and thus less recognized in her professional capacity, Carson faced threats, ridicule, and accusations of being a "hysterical woman" and unqualified. Nonetheless, her words remain strikingly relevant today: "It is an era dominated by industry, in which the right to make a dollar at whatever cost is seldom challenged" (Carson, 1962). Today more than sixty years after the publication of *Silent Spring* – which foreshadowed the capitalist and technocratic delusion of omnipotence that has since continued to exploit people and degrade ecosystems – it is striking to consider how little Carson's warnings were heeded. What kind of world might have emerged had her words been taken seriously?

1 "Decolonial thinkers have denounced the inherently violent nature of modernity. Modernity begins in 1492. The modern project is Eurocentric, colonial, and violent. These elements cannot be separated and treated independently. For this reason, the term coloniality is used – a fusion of modernity and colonialism" (Borghi, 2020, p. 73). The concept of decoloniality was developed by the interdisciplinary critical theory group *Modernidad/Colonialidad/Descolonialidad* (MCD), established in 1998 by scholars from the central and southern regions of Abya Yala (a term from the Cuna language used to refer to the American continent to avoid employing the terminology of the colonizers).

Would we find ourselves at today's critical juncture if different choices had been made at that time?

A few decades later, another manifesto, far less known, proved to be even more powerful, both because it was the product of collective work and because it explicitly articulated (perhaps for the first time) the intersection between environmental, social, and colonial issues: the *Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women*[2]. In September 1995, a hundred Indigenous women from various parts of the world gathered in Beijing outside the Fourth World Conference on Women organized by the United Nations, where they collectively discussed and produced a truly revolutionary declaration:

> We, the women of the original peoples of the world have struggled actively to defend our rights to self-determination and to our territories which have been invaded and colonized by powerful nations and interests. We have been and are continuing to suffer from multiple oppressions; as Indigenous peoples, as citizens of colonized and neo-colonial countries, as women, and as members of the poorer classes of society. In spite of this, we have been and continue to protect, transmit, and develop our Indigenous cosmovision, our science and technologies, our arts and culture, and our Indigenous socio-political economic systems, which are in harmony with the natural laws of mother earth. We still retain the ethical and esthetic values, the knowledge and philosophy, the spirituality, which conserves and nurtures Mother Earth. We are persisting in our struggles for self-determination and for our rights to our territories. This has been shown in our tenacity and capacity to withstand and survive the colonization happening in our lands in the last 500 years (Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women, 1995)[3].

These words clearly convey the necessarily intersectional perspective of those who experience multiple forms of discrimination firsthand and who, precisely because of this marginalization, are able to understand the connections between different axes of oppression affecting both humans and non-humans. This second manifesto makes evident the intrinsic link between ecological and decolonial approaches, thus denouncing the (neo)extractivist logics (Svampa, 2019) typical of contemporary capitalist colonialism. The colonization of peoples and territories has been the primary driver of many of the world's most pressing social and environmental crises, as highlighted by the postcolonial perspective (Burgio, 2022). Within academic discourse, insights from *Indigenous Studies* are particularly significant due to their intersectional and inherently ecological nature:

> Indigenous conceptions of interconnectivity view […] all parts of our multiple subjectivities as tied closely together. The term affirms that all parts of our identity are inseparable and interconnected, such as our sexuality, sexual orientation, cultural alignment, heritage, lineage, gender, socioeconomic status, spirituality, and connection to the land (Wilson, 1996, 2008) […].
> Indigenous knowledge systems are rooted in the concept of relationality. For more than 50,000 years, Indigenous nations in North America have had intimate and vibrant relationships with the land, including water, plants, animals, birds, and all living things (Wilson, 2015). This coexistence has also been referred to as relationality, the recognition 'that we, the land, the water, and all living creatures are related and, as relatives, we are meant to love and care for each other' (Wilson, 2015, p. 255).
> Within some Indigenous knowledge systems there are understandings that we are only here because of the land and our connection to the land. Bang and colleagues (2014) summarize this philosophy by articulating that 'land is, therefore we are' (p. 45) (Maina-Okori et al., 2018, p. 288).

2 It has been challenging to decide – as a white European academic woman – whether to include the knowledge and perspectives of Indigenous women in this contribution. Does this constitute appropriation? Is it an act of speaking on behalf of others? Or rather, is it an effort to amplify voices that have been historically marginalized? I was once suggested by Rachele Borghi that key distinction lies in intention and purpose: the use of knowledge produced by marginalized groups becomes exploitative when it serves personal gain or career advancement. While this publication inevitably contributes to my academic record, my primary motivation is the dissemination of these critical perspectives, ensuring that voices systematically excluded from knowledge production are amplified and acknowledged, including within the Italian academic and intellectual context.

3 Moreover, the Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women (1995) presents a strong critique of the United Nations Conference on Women. While the conference appears to recognize various issues affecting women globally, it fails to interrogate their structural causes:
- it acknowledges poverty as a critical issue but does not recognize that it is a direct consequence of the interests of powerful and colonizing nations, which continue to impose their economic development models and monocultural practices on Indigenous lands, thereby perpetuating economic dependence and dispossession;
- it identifies unequal access to education and healthcare as significant problems yet neglects to challenge the Western epistemological framework underpinning these systems – one that has historically discriminated against Indigenous peoples and contributed to cultural erasure and ethnocide through Western media, education, and religious institutions;
- it fails to acknowledge that the economic empowerment and social mobility of women in the so-called Global North are often made possible by an unsustainable model of development that exacerbates the violation of the rights of women, Indigenous peoples, and non-Western nations (cf. Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women, 1995).

If Carson's manifesto exposed the problems of a production-oriented economic system that was accelerating blindly, disregarding all elements beyond profit, the manifesto of Indigenous women – as well as the perspectives advanced by *Indigenous Studies* – underscores the profound interconnection between ecological and social issues. "The interconnectedness of bodies, women, and territories has re-emerged as a central theme in both the theoretical and practical dimensions of numerous feminist and ecological social movements. This resurgence is particularly influenced by the critical contributions of feminisms from the Global South (Pérez Orozco, 2019), with Ni Una Menos standing as a significant example" (De Vita, 2025, p. 15).

These reflections "from the margins" are decisive as they challenge us to recover and reconstruct an idea of ecology and interconnection that has been systematically dismantled by the disjunctive paradigm and the capitalist, anthropocentric worldviews that have created an artificial separation between humans and what they define as "nature". However, it is crucial to ensure that recognizing this does not translate into new forms of exploitation and colonialism by placing the burden of solving the world's ecological (environmental and social) crises on Indigenous women and communities – particularly since these crises were not caused by them but have disproportionately affected them. Instead, these perspectives must be genuinely considered, as they offer far more effective approaches to addressing contemporary challenges than frameworks such as the *2030 Agenda* and similar policy initiatives.

Considering and acknowledging the importance of these perspectives demands to let "the subaltern speak" (Spivak, 1988), thus necessarily entailing a postcolonial gaze (Burgio, 2022; Burgio & Vaccaro, 2023) and a decolonialization of knowledges:

> Eurocentric epistemologies remain the only ones considered viable in the 'best of all possible worlds.' This claim can only stand if we accept that some forms of knowledge are inherently more valuable than others - the only ones to have earned the status of 'scientific'. You may call it epistemic violence if you wish. The epistemic violence of coloniality is rooted in the fact that modernity has erased non-Western knowledge systems that developed within Indigenous and autochthonous societies. This is not merely a process of invisibilization but one of outright suppression and subordination.
> Modernity has scientifically constructed the assumption that there is a single, true, universal form of knowledge. This assumption has functioned almost like an enchantment, magically transforming Western knowledge into the only valid means of explaining reality. The Western method of knowledge production has become the sole legitimate one, violently shaping the world into a Western Eurocentric world (Borghi, 2020, p. 83).

## 3. A posthuman/compostist pedagogy and a conscious experiential nature-based education as possible directions

Various perspectives – such as Deep Ecology (Naess, 1986) and Bateson's ecological framework (Bateson, 1977) – have long advocated for a shift that is not only epistemological but also, and above all, ontological, in how we conceive of ourselves within the ecosystem. However, given the actual crises, there is a growing the necessity for an even more radical change of perspective, moving toward a critical transfeminist posthumanism. From an epistemological point of view, posthuman vision – especially in its critical-feminist declinations – can contribute to providing pedagogy with the necessary theoretical tools to face actual challenges, considering the need for decolonialization and taking into account Indigenous points of view.

The term posthuman is often subject to terminological confusion. At times, posthumanism is mistakenly conflated with transhumanism, the techno-enthusiastic movement that aspires to enhance the human condition through technoscientific evolution to the extent of denying the materiality of human experience and its terrestrial belonging, even imagining scenarios where the human subject transcends the body or migrates to other planets. The posthumanism referenced here, however, is based on entirely different premises: the human that critical transfeminist posthumanism seeks to move beyond is the Man understood as the measure of all things – the white, cisgender, Western, able-bodied, capitalist-colonizer who has claimed exclusive access to the category of humanity, relegating to a subhuman status, and thus outside the sphere of rights, all those who do not fit within his parameters: women, racialized individuals, trans and non-heterosexual people, disabled people, non-human animals, territories, plants, minerals, ecosystems (Balzano, 2024; Braidotti, 2014, 2023; Santoemma, 2021, 2024).

Posthuman perspectives, understood in these terms, challenge the power structures that currently govern relationships among individuals, social groups, and species by deconstructing the very notion of "human" when it is defined as an exclusionary category that marginalizes a vast range of other subjectivities. Posthuman epistemology calls for a shift from the center to the margins, initiating a decolonization of knowledge and power. It is, therefore, an epistemology that is both decolonial and situated (Haraway, 1988), as it exposes the non-universality of knowledge systems that have historically claimed to be universal. Feminist epistemologies, which have long emphasized the situated nature of knowledge, are inherently posthuman epistemologies.

How, then, can livable presents and possible futures be constructed through a posthuman perspective? A "compostist" ethics (Haraway, 2019) offers one possible alternative vision for a "coexistence of differences" (Acanfora, 2021), fostering less asymmetrical power relations and greater hybridization (Balzano, 2024; Braidotti, 2014; De Vita, 2025; Ferrante, 2022; Pinto Minerva & Gallelli, 2004): "Compost is the product of the work of fungi, bacteria, and worms in 'intra-action,' that is, within a field of forces where agency is never reducible to a single individual or subject, but rather emerges from the intimate and co-dependent relationships between different inseparable agents" (Ferrante, 2022, p. 10).

A critical transfeminist posthuman approach to pedagogy[4], one that aims to dismantle the humanist foundations that separate and dominate everything excluded from the category of the "human" while simultaneously constructing new situated epistemologies from the margins, may contribute to loosening the grip of deeply rooted epistemological legacies inherited from the colonial-modern nexus. This, in turn, can open up spaces – including within education – for new ways of relating among humans, and between humans and the more-than-human.

One possible way to translate these ecotransfeminist, decolonial, and posthuman reflections into educational practice is through nature-based experiential education, provided that such approaches are developed from an intersectional perspective, genuinely ecological and committed to social justice. Nature-based educational practices can offer a privileged space for fostering the radical shift in perspective that is urgently needed. These experiences – by emphasizing direct bodily interaction with the environment, relations with others (both humans and more-than-human), and the integration of risk and adventure elements (Gigli & Borelli, 2024) – encourage the exploration of interdependence, which a core principle of ecological and systemic thinking. Furthermore, as demonstrated by a recent systematic review of meta-analyses (Barragan-Jason et al., 2023), physical contact with "nature"[5] enhances the sense of connection to it, and both (physical exposure and psychological connection) contribute to greater human well-being and increased respect for the more-than-human world.

However, despite these significant findings highlighting the transformative potential of nature-based education, it is crucial that research and reflection on these approaches engage with intersectional, ecotransfeminist, decolonial, and posthuman perspectives to recognize and address:

the vicious cycle (Borelli, 2021) created by a disjunctive paradigm that separates the human from the natural world, which in turn leads to the utilitarian exploitation of ecosystems, thereby undermining the very possibility of educating toward an ecological paradigm;

the power dynamics and systems of oppression that perpetuate inequalities, even within nature-based educational contexts. These dynamics manifest at multiple levels, including the accessibility of these experiences—both in terms of socioeconomic barriers that determine who can participate when these activities involve financial costs and in terms of geographic proximity to healthy natural spaces and the ability to reach them[6].

It is, therefore, not sufficient to simply implement nature-based educational activities to achieve the deep transformation needed. To ensure that such practices fulfill their transformative potential, it is essential to cultivate a critical awareness in order to prevent the perpetuation – even within nature-based educational settings – of exploitation and oppression, whether directed at ecosystems or marginalized social groups.

As Kahn and Humes (2009) emphasize, there is a need to move toward a "pedagogy of total liberation", one that actively works against all forms of oppression, whether against humans, the more-than-human world, or the environment as a whole (Maina-Okori et al., 2018). In this sense, it is necessary to transition from a humanist

4 It's important to acknowledge that many Italian scholars in the pedagogical field, although not always explicitly with a posthuman and/or transfeminist perspectives, have worked extensively in directions that resonate with these issues, particularly in the fields of ecological pedagogy, care ethics, intercultural education, and critical education (e.g.: Burgio, 2022; De Vita, 2025; Dozza, 2018; Mortari, 2020; Pinto Minerva & Gallelli, 2004; Ulivieri, 2017 – just to name a few).

5 "It is necessary to critically examine the term and concept of "nature". From a systemic and ecological perspective, referring to "nature" as something separate from humans – encompassing environments or beings distinct from us – can appear inconsistent (Fletcher, 2017; Morton, 2007). Commonly used expressions in this field reveal this ontological inconsistency: statements such as engaging in activities "in a natural environment", going "into nature", or appreciating "natural elements" reveal a perception of human beings as external to "nature", as if we need to physically reach it, a clear indication of our perceived distance […]. At the same time, from a more experiential rather than philosophical standpoint, the emphasis placed on the concept of nature through this terminology does not necessarily indicate a sense of detachment. Even when individuals perceive themselves as inherently part of "nature", they may still wish to highlight the distinction between highly anthropized, urban environments and less anthropized spaces, where the presence of other animals, plants, and natural elements such as water, rock, soil, sunlight, and air is more pronounced. It is therefore useful to momentarily separate the philosophical dimension from the experiential one to understand how these seemingly contradictory elements – feeling part of nature while also seeking proximity to it – can coexist. However, keeping this risk of inconsistency in mind remains crucial to avoid perpetuating an anthropocentric and dichotomous perspective, which ultimately proves to be destructive" (Borelli, 2024, pp. 48-49).

6 During a training session on nature-based experiential education held near Bologna, a participant pointed out the inherent difficulty of implementing such educational approaches in her hometown, Taranto, where air pollution from the local industrial sector makes the air literally unbreathable. This example reflects a broader and worldwide phenomenon: polluted air and water and destroyed natural ecosystems tend to be concentrated in specific geographical areas, namely in regions inhabited by populations deemed "less human", and thus considered to be less deserving of access to healthy and natural environments.

perspective rooted in "*Cogito, ergo sum*" to a posthuman and decolonial paradigm centered on the notion that "Land is, therefore we are" (Bang et al., 2014).

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