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Narrazioni e relazione tra genere e ecopedagogia

Between human and *non-human*. Ecological perspectives in contemporary children's literature

Tra umano e non umano. Prospettive ecologiche nella letteratura per l'infanzia contemporanea

Rossella Caso
Researcher, University of Foggia, rossella.caso@unifg.it

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the ecofeminist paradigm, this contribution explores children's literature as a tool for reflecting on current environmental issues and the role of childhood in countering violence and domination over the natural, animal, and human systems. The child's body, vulnerable and constantly evolving, and so different from the adult's, is viewed as a vehicle for an ecosystemic experience of coexistence between humans, animals, and nature. The analysis of works by several contemporary authors suggests that resisting domination means returning to that primordial state of interconnectedness with the natural world and all the creatures, human and non-human, inhabiting the Earth.

KEYWORDS
Childhood, children's literature, child's body, nature, ecofeminist paradigm.
Infanzia, letteratura per l'infanzia, corpo infantile, natura, paradigma ecofemminista.

Partendo dal paradigma dell'eco-femminismo, il contributo esplora la letteratura per l'infanzia come strumento per riflettere sulle attuali questioni ambientali e sul ruolo dell'infanzia nel contrastare la violenza e il dominio sul sistema naturale, animale e umano. Il corpo del bambino, fragile e in continua trasformazione, così diverso da quello adulto, è visto come veicolo di un'esperienza ecosistemica di coesistenza tra esseri umani, animali e natura. L'analisi di opere di alcune autrici contemporanee suggerisce che resistere al dominio significa ritornare a quello stato primordiale di interconnessione con il mondo naturale e con tutte le creature, umane e non, che abitano il pianeta Terra.

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Corresponding author: Rossella Caso | rossella.caso@unifg.it

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1. *Being a child* or about the "extreme smallness" of childhood

"A child is a little person. They are only small for a short while, then they grow up. [...] Slowly and silently, their body stretches," writes Beatrice Alemagna – renowned author and illustrator of children's literature – in her attempt to answer a fundamental question through her picturebook: *What is a Child?* (Alemagna, 2008)[1].

In children's literature, being a child – understood in its ontological essence – is often portrayed as a condition deeply rooted in the body: a small, fragile, and transitory body, "with small hands, small feet, and small ears" (Alemagna, 2008). It is a body destined to grow and transform, to stretch and eventually no longer be small. This body bears the marks of its own irreducible difference, of which "extreme smallness," as Milena Bernardi (2007) defines it, is but one possible trait: "There are children of all kinds, of all colors, of all shapes. [...] There are strange, short, round, silent children. Children with glasses, in wheelchairs. Children with braces that sparkle in the sun" (Alemagna, 2008).

It is also a body marked by radical otherness, an otherness that resides in what the "latent pedagogies" (Becchi, 2005) of the adult world tend to reject, yet which is, and must remain, an integral part of the child's way of being-in-the-world. "There are difficult, obnoxious children who never want to go to sleep, spoiled children who do only what they want, children who sometimes break plates, bowls, and everything else", Alemagna (2008) writes again.

Most significantly for our purposes, it is also a body that serves as a conduit for a profound and often revelatory connection with the cosmos, a connection that allows the child to cry when a stone slips into the water, and conversely, to experience joy in smelling the grass with closed eyes, chasing pigeons, shouting freely, listening to the distant voice of seashells, or even wrinkling their nose in front of a mirror (Alemagna, 2008). The infinitesimal – rarely, if ever, noticed by adults – is frequently explored by children (Bernardi, 2007).

Thus, the "paper childhoods" depicted in picturebooks, with their gaze so deeply attuned to everything – to the substance flowing beneath the visible – subvert the conventional logics through which adults interpret the world. These childhoods engage in a discourse that may be described as "profoundly philosophical" (Grilli, 2021): a form of philosophy that speaks precisely to what the adult gaze can no longer perceive, and which concerns the essential, the radical, and the unsettling – yet also the deeply revealing – dimensions of human existence. Among these is the child's relationship with the natural, social, and animal worlds, in which they experience, perhaps for the last time, a deep and intuitive sense of fusion with the "everything" that will later become fragmented and distant in adulthood.

2. From the maternal body to the child's body. Reading childhood through the eco-feminist paradigm

Children's literature, when analyzed through the lens of ecofeminism and ecocriticism, provides valuable tools for deconstructing what, according to Greta Gaard (2019), are the three stages of the *logic of domination*. This logic pertains to the structures of oppression inherent in the system: *alienation*, defined as the belief in a separate identity, individualism, and the total autonomy of the individual in their relationship with the world; *hierarchy*, where a single characteristic is elevated as the defining feature of the self, seen as the sole criterion through which to interpret one's relationship with the physical, natural, and anthropic otherness; and *domination,* which justifies the subordination of beings based on their presumed inferiority and the absence of that singular, fundamental characteristic.

According to Gaard, whose reflections are presented in *Critical Ecofeminism* (2019), it is precisely the ecofeminist and ecocritical perspectives that can shed light on narratives that, among others, seem to provide an antidote to the logic of domination. This logic is rooted in the myth of the separate self and offers stories that speak of connection, community, and deep interdependence among humans, animals, and nature.

The metaphorical site of this connection appears to be the body: first the maternal body, which shelters and nurtures life; then the infant body, nourished by the maternal body and sustained by breast milk; and finally, the child's body, in its close relationship with nature, becoming a body itself, a Great Mother that protects and embraces the body of her child. Contemporary children's literature delves deeply into these aspects, narrating a fusion that passes through these bodies, connecting them not only to one another but to the cosmos as a whole, as will be demonstrated in the examples below.

"My mother is love on the surface of her skin. A whole garden", writes Stéphane Servant in *My Mother* (2016), illustrated by Emmanuelle Houdart. A "love on the surface of her skin" (Ibidem) encapsulates a lifelong bond: "Do not fear, my mother said. When you were born, I tattooed in my heart a bird's song, your first cry, a dew drop, your beloved face" (Ibidem). The mother and child are depicted with the little one's head resting on the

1 English translations of quotation from the texts referred to in the article are by the writer.

mother's chest, and their bodies appear almost fused once again; the mother's body is literally permeated by nature, while the child's body is simultaneously intertwined with the mother's. She is the Great Mother, with all her fruits and inhabitants, including the wolf, which in fairy tale symbolism represents the guardian of the threshold, the boundary separating life from death, of which the wolf is the messenger. The experience of motherhood clearly involves traversing the margins, what Faeti (1998) refers to as the "shadow zone", a zone inhabited by women, children, and, alongside them, animals. It is a space inhabited only by those who are capable of perceiving the substance flowing beneath the concrete reality of things, and this substance is linked to the human condition: life as it is born, and death as it comes to an end. This dual function is biologically embodied in the amniotic fluid, which can serve both functions – life-giving or death-bringing – if the child does not see the light of day. This duality is clearly embodied and safeguarded by the mother's own body.

An "tree-body" is that of an expectant mother, again depicted by Emmanuelle Houdart in *Refuges* (2021), "a place that makes you feel safe, where nothing bad can happen to you" (Ibidem), "a round, soft, and ambulatory home" (Ibidem), as Mariana Ruiz Johnson describes it in the book *The Mother* (2013). This body preserves life and, at the same time, delivers it to the world.

3. Co-being, between human and non-human

A child's engagement with the world begins with their nervous system, which, as demonstrated by neuroscientific studies drawing on Darwin's *A Biographical Sketch of an Infant*, is particularly open and receptive to the natural, animal, and anthropic environment. This openness likely stems from qualities inherent to the child's in-fans state, traditionally associated with the animal world and reflecting ideas of "non-autonomy" and "deficiency" in the child (Grilli, 2022). As Egle Becchi notes in *A History of Childhood*, it was not uncommon for the child to be "assimilated to the animal kingdom and to humble figures of society, connected to seasons, times of the day, and numbers that could mark their growth and establish unambiguous terms for their age, as well as elements or states of elements, with which care could be provided" (Becchi, 1994, p. 37). Here, the idea of care is primarily linked to the attempt to discipline and conform the child's body, drawing it closer to the idea of a child who is "all vitality and health" (Ibidem), as outlined in the latent pedagogies of the adult world.

R. Schérer and G. Hocquenghem (1976) coined the term "co-being of childhood" to describe this special relationship with the non-human. According to this theory, the unfinished body of the child is particularly predisposed to hybridization with the non-human – plants, air, water, animals – reproducing in the world the stages of the species recapitation that Ernst Haeckel had associated with the human fetus. This process would see the child experiencing all forms of life, erasing the boundaries between species and with nature (Grilli, 2022). This peculiarity is evident in how childhood tends to dwell on the substance of all things, pulling at the fringes of experiences, as Walter Benjamin (2010) suggests, unraveling them and drawing the greatest happiness from this practice.

The child is, by nature, an "ecological" being, in the etymological sense of the word "oikos" (from which "ecological" derives), meaning both "home" and "environment." The child, therefore, would feel particularly at ease within the ecosystem, perceiving themselves in perfect continuity with it, their body existing in a space between the human and the non-human. Aquatic children, half-human and half-fish, who began appearing in illustrated literature between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are a particularly striking example of this, as is the quintessential "forest-child" of our literature: Pinocchio, who tells the story of a childhood that, at its origin – the Great Mother – must always return to in order to rediscover the meaning of their (non)human existence.

4. On a *great day of nothing*, a child…

When it ventures into nature, childhood, with the wonder and amazement that characterize its gaze on the world, discovers the interdependencies that govern the ecosystem: «the interactions that link the sun, water, earth, and blade of grass» (Frabboni, Pinto, 2008, p. 184), and these connections with its still unfinished body, still fused with them.

Among the "paper" children that tell of this bond is the unnamed protagonist of *A Great Day of Nothing* by Beatrice Alemagna (2016). It has been chosen because, more than any other, it narratively represents the themes that this contribution attempts to explore.

At the beginning of the story, the child seems almost unaware of nature, just outside his family's country house. He lies on the couch, with a video game in his hands, narrating a battle with aliens. For him, while his mother sits working at the computer, it seems to be the only form of entertainment. This continues until the mother forces him to go outside, despite the rain, the mud, and despite his refusal. He wears a red raincoat. Red, like Little Red Riding Hood's.

And in that countryside, so similar to the forest where Little Red Riding Hood moved, the child ends up (happily) getting lost. The game console, accidentally dropped into the pond, delivers him to the textures of nature, to its smells and inhabitants, snails and frogs, awakened by the heavy rain. The red raincoat, while helping the reader to always keep track of him, distinguishing him from the surrounding vegetation and allowing his path to be followed, also confuses him now with a mushroom, now with a flower, until his near-total metamorphosis into the trunk of a tree: "The drops were hitting my back like stones. I felt like a tree lost in the storm" (Ibidem).

This "fusion" between self and the whole – vegetal and animal – refers to the profound nature of childhood, ancestral and blended with the natural and vegetal environment, with its cycle of changes, life, and death. A slip, and the world, viewed upside down, suddenly offers a new perspective on things: he climbs a tree, breathes the air deeply like an animal, drinks the rain, encounters unknown insects, talks to a bird, jumps in a puddle splashing everywhere, collects smooth, shiny pebbles, and within them, he sees the world sparkling.

Once this experience of connection, so intimate and profound, is lived, the child will no longer be the same. Once back home and having removed the wet raincoat, he can look at his mother with new eyes. Sitting together with a hot chocolate, the embrace that is never told but fully evoked by the glance they finally exchange.

The child, in his "animal" and "wild" dimension, becomes the bearer of a "potentiated" and therefore "resilient" childhood. For while inhabiting the darkness and looking fear straight in the eyes, stepping out of the nursery where the adult world would like to confine him, he knows, thanks to his ancestral wisdom, that only his gaze can truly penetrate its invisibility, leading to a deeper understanding of the human condition, of which he embodies, in essence, its most intimate substance. And this substance is profoundly interconnected with the whole.

Rachel Carson (2020), in *The Sense of Wonder* (*Brevi lezioni di meraviglia*), writes:

> Many children, perhaps because they are small themselves and closer to the ground, notice and appreciate what is small and inconspicuous. For this reason, it is easy to share with them the beauty that usually escapes us because we look too quickly and see the whole but not its parts. Some of nature's most exquisite works are miniature, as anyone who has observed a snowflake through a magnifying glass knows. Just invest a few dollars in a good magnifying glass to bring a new world to life. Together with your child, look at objects that you habitually judge as common or uninteresting. A sprinkle of sand grains can reveal glittering gems in shades of pink or crystal, sparkling black beads, or even an assortment of Lilliputian stones, sea urchin spines, and snail shell fragments. A clump of moss viewed through a lens will turn into a dense tropical jungle, where insects as large as tigers sneak around strange, lush trees (pp. 22-23).

While deconstructing the founding concepts of the logic of domination – *alienation*, *hierarchy*, and *domination* – these childhoods portrayed seem to tell us, between the lines, that humanity will have the opportunity to save itself only if, perhaps in "a great day of nothing", it succeeds in finding new forms of relationship with the non-human. Only if it can give citizenship to the child's other gaze, capable, precisely due to its intrinsic otherness, of renewing reality and making it more habitable. In this way, it will have introduced care and respect for oneself, for others, and for the cosmos (Grilli, 2022).

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