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Ecofeminism and Environmental Justice

Human/non-human interconnections

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Abstract

This essay aims to explore the relationship between women and the environment and the issue of environmental justice in the specific by analysing the thought of those authors who, over the years, have contributed to enriching the reflection on ecofeminism.

First, I will outline an analysis of the current global situation in terms of economic, social and environmental oppressions, inequalities and vulnerabilities: from the unequal use of natural resources between North and South to the unlimited accumulation of wealth and power of the extremely wealthy on the planet to the detriment of the most fragile and vulnerable humanity, to the capitalist system of inordinate economic growth resulting in the degradation and destruction of nature.

Next, my analysis will lead to the social root of such injustices, then it will focus on the system of domination relations on which societies have developed and operate. It is a system characterised by hierarchical patterns, oppositional dichotomies and individualism – which gives rise to forms of abuse such as androcentrism, speciesism, sexism and racism.

I will introduce ecofeminism as a form of interconnection, inclusion and care for life and nature that welcomes – and cooperates with – all living beings, human and non-human. My aim here is to draw a picture of the origins of the ecofeminist movement – or, rather, movements – that developed around the world and began a narrative of history from not only a feminist, but also an intersectional point of view, with regard to social and racial groups, the environment and natural resources.

In conclusion, as an example of the relationship between the domination over women and the exploitation of nature, a description will ensue of two Italian cases of environmental justice – Seveso and Casale Monferrato – in which women have become protagonists in the struggle for gender emancipation and environmental protection, in an attempt to eradicate the capitalist and patriarchal system that traditionally relegates them to a condition of subordination.

Table of contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	4
1. Equality as a political choice	7
1.1 Winners and losers in a global crisis	8
1.2 A tale of fossil-fuelled progress.....	16
1.3 Human domination, or nature as a terra nullius	21
2. Ecofeminist polyphony	28
2.1 Roots of Ecofeminism.....	30
2.2 A new ethic of earthcare	39
2.3 A bottom-up perspective of subsistence.....	44
3. Multiple visions of the self	48
3.1 Being in contraposition to others: the master identity	50
3.2 Being in relation to others: the ecofeminist ecological self.....	57
4. Talking bodies of Environmental Justice	63
4.1 Seveso: a dioxin-told story.....	68
4.2 Casale Monferrato: a place identity surviving asbestos.....	78
Conclusion	88
Bibliography	90

Introduction

On an academic level at least, I had always set aside my attraction to environmental issues, obliged by courses of study that, as at a crossroads, imposed a very precise choice and at the same time a clear exclusion. The motivation that pushed me towards the Environmental Humanities was curiosity and the possibility of entering into a course of study that could finally intertwine – by rejoining them – the paths of that crossroads.

The fluidity between disciplines made it feasible for me to shape a path that expressed my interests and passions, personal predispositions, as much as possible, without stakes or particular impositions. On the one hand, this has given me the opportunity to delve into feminist issues, towards which I have always nurtured interest and admiration; on the other, I have been able to unleash that hint of idealism matured during my previous studies in International Cooperation and in my work experiences in the non-governmental organisations world, which I have kept alive even now that I am involved in social sustainability within companies, with more pragmatism and much less romanticism.

In short, the perspective adopted in these last two years of study finally combines social and environmental justice. Indeed, it is a perspective that sees no other way to realise the issues usually associated with social justice – equal distribution of rights and goods such as health, education, income, work – than through a marked care and attention for the environment. The reverse is also true: a slowdown in the extraction and consumption of natural resources is necessary to foster decent conditions for all. There is nothing more topical today as we find ourselves in the midst of an ecological crisis that feeds on and is intertwined with a multitude of social problems. Environmental violence intensifies social violence and viceversa.

It is within this incubator of disciplinary hybridity that I have found two keys of interpretation that are particularly significant to me, and which are helping me in the construction of a point of view useful for understanding and confronting this complex socio-ecological web. The first is ecofeminism, the second is environmental justice. For both concepts, I took my cue from the course Environmental History: Labour-Environment Relations In Contemporary Italy held by Prof. Zazzara, who succeeded in conveying the passion for the search for justice by also offering a different point of view, that of the women protagonists of those environmental disasters in which human agony goes hand in hand with non-human pain, in a poisonous domino effect that leaves no escape. This research work was then an opportunity to explore the theme of ecofeminism under the

expert and anti-speciesist guidance of Prof. Timeto.

By juxtaposing the concept of ecofeminism with that of environmental justice, my aim in this work is to research the link between movements for women's rights, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, and liberation from all forms of social and environmental oppression. What emerges is a double-knot correspondence, a suffocating and deep-rooted double bind, between forms of oppression and discrimination such as sexism, racism, classism, speciesism and the exploitation of nature, but not only. Guiding my research work is the hope for a reversal of the trend, certainly not by chance, but led by ecofeminists, and by those who, while not defining themselves as such, have carried on socio-environmental battles, paving the way for dialogue and the valorisation of diversity, unhinging the dualisms and hierarchical relationships of patriarchal logic.

In this sense, in the first chapter I let the data and numbers speak for themselves, expressing an ever-running contemporaneity, sick of profit, abusive and oppressive towards those who do not keep up. The data I present portray in harsh strokes a system of divisive, energy-draining hierarchies, which designates the winners and unfairly distributes privileges; at the same time, it proclaims and marginalises the defeated, making them the private property of a master – male and white – who in this presumed supremacy feels legitimised to perpetrate forms of discrimination. These relations of domination place women, as well as nature, non-human species, and everyone else outside the canons of the master's identity, in a condition of otherness and subalternity.

In chapter two, I introduce the theme of ecofeminism as a key to unhinging stereotypical views, overcoming discriminatory and oppositional dynamics. Ecofeminism insinuates itself into the webs of relations between human and non-human, proposing itself as a formula for resolving socio-environmental battles and disrupting monolithic beliefs. Indeed, the core of ecofeminism is interconnectedness, crossing boundaries, breaking down limits. In a nutshell, ecofeminism subverts the aforementioned system of domination, bringing together the human and the non-human, the social and the natural, in a continuous dialogue.

This is followed by a chapter dealing with two different models of viewing the self: on the one hand, the ecofeminist ecological self further highlights the dynamics of relationship and interdependence that manage to loosen the meshes of domination and opposition of the other with respect to the self, leaving ample space for relationships of care, reciprocity of needs, friendship and respect. On the other, the nemesis of the relational self, characterised by hyperseparation with respect to the other and hyper rationality. It is the

self of the master identity, strongly marked by the individualism and instrumentalisation of the other typical of Western capitalist culture.

For the last chapter I have chosen to narrate the environmental disasters of Seveso and Casale Monferrato as sadly striking examples of the porosity between human and non-human, but not only. These are cases of environmental justice in which the role of women, and their bodies, act as litmus tests for the degree of pollution that has penetrated the environment. The cases I have studied, placed within the framework of my research work and seen from an intersectional perspective, make the interconnection between oppressions and the patriarchal matrix even more evident.

In conclusion, the approach I used saw the juxtaposition of the identikit of an individualist and profit-maximising reality with the thought of ecofeminist scholars and the narratives of two of the environmental disasters that have most marked Italy's environmental and industrial history, in an exercise of reflection and self-education on the importance of making kin, learning to overcome the dualism between the self and the other, and acquiring an ever-increasing awareness of being part of a single ecosystem that binds all forms of life.

1. Equality as a political choice

Popular environmentalism does not conceive of nature as a space apart from human activities and presence; on the contrary, the nature it deals with is the space of everyday life, a resource for survival rather than a place of recreation. [...] [The] environmental risks are not distributed equally among different ethnic and social groups because it is minorities and the poorest who foot the bill for the welfare of others. Thus, popular environmentalism is an environmentalism in which class, gender and race matter.

(Armiero, 2013, p. 22)

Inequality calls inequality. Disparities cumulate, degenerate, wreak havoc on situations that are already serious, and spread like wildfire, encroaching on every sphere of life, from food, health, origin, wealth, to climate, human rights and gender. The list of domains in which this plague propagates is potentially infinite and changes in perspective depending on the spatial and temporal parameter one uses. Inequalities impoverish, starve, kill, wear down and destroy our planet from the inside. No one can claim to be completely unscathed or untouchable, especially in the long term. As Erika Cudworth writes, introducing a concept such as that of “domination”, which – when further expanded – will constitute a major pivot within this dissertation, “[t]he globalizing tendencies of modernity mean that relations of domination are not restricted to regions of the globe characterized by high modernity, but may be seen in different forms and degrees, in operation around the planet” (Cudworth, 2005, p. 64)

It is however true that only certain people are paying the highest price today. It is these people, together with non-human entities, that are being subjugated by the aforementioned domination – the people whose fundamental human rights seem to be less fundamental than the rights of other humans. Lucas Chancel (2022), lead author of the 2022 World Inequality Report, states that inequality is a political choice.

The first chapter of my dissertation proposes to take up and twist that statement, in a kind of courageous and encouraging call to action that leaves room for a positive change

of course. My purpose, here, is to accompany the reader on a space-time-gender tour. Here is a brief outline of what will be covered in the coming paragraphs: first, a shameful and desperate picture of the current world situation in terms of inequalities, polarisations, extremisms and injustices between North and South, rich and poor, man and woman will be sketched; secondly, a Western, male-driven view of the past and of the events which have unfolded up to current times will be explored, and the hegemonic Anthropocene mainstream narrative, together with the paradoxes it lays on, will be presented; thirdly, the counter-narrative which has developed as a form of opposition against – and in the name of those whose perspective has been annihilated by – the hegemonic Anthropocene narrative will be introduced. Afterwards, a new viewpoint offered by the concept of *anthroparchy* (Cudworth, 2005) will allow a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the current situation on inequalities, as characterised and caused by the human domination, the latter understood as an interconnected multiplicity of systems of dominations, each with different levels and degrees of difference, which are also interlinked and interacting. Finally, a hope for the future – coming from the standpoint and experience of ecofeminism and represented by a new way of being human – will be expressed to rediscover and give back a voice to what Stefania Barca (2020) calls “forces of reproduction”, i.e. those entities, human and non-human, that hitherto have been oppressed, exploited, marginalised by the prevaricating narrative and by the “privileged eye of the white/male subject of history” (Barca, 2020, p. 2).

1.1 Winners and losers in a global crisis

In 2022, the world population will reach 8 billion. If in an ideal world all 8 billion people would have access to equal opportunities and rights, today a large chunk of the world's population struggles to keep up, risking being swept away by the fast and heedless pace of the proportionally tiny minority of more advantaged people. Inequality does not only create dissatisfaction or frustration, but it also reaps victims when access to health and sexual and reproductive rights is not guaranteed, when the poverty line is such that adequate sanitation, or an adequate daily caloric intake cannot be guaranteed. Inequality kills when it results in racism. Data collected by Oxfam International within the “Inequality Kills” report confirm what has just been stated, suggesting a conservative estimate of the cost of inequality paid in terms of human lives: every day inequality contributes to the death of at least 21,300 people, one person killed every 4 seconds (Oxfam, 2022).

Approximately 10 people worldwide have died because of inequalities since we started reading this paragraph.

And as to disparities, it is clear that the consequences of this massacre do not fall uniformly across the globe. The richest and most privileged, sheltered in the embrace of capitalism, escape these lethal estimates. Instead, it is those people who in terms of geographical origin, income, gender and sexual orientation fall into the disadvantaged segment of the population that bear the brunt:

There is no doubt that those most affected by climate change and its consequences – environmental disasters, spread of epidemics lack of water, destruction of natural resources and ecosystems – are women and children, particularly from countries in the South whose vulnerability is the result of inequalities produced by social roles gender roles, social discrimination and poverty. But also the communities of queer and trans people of colour, the disabled, the elderly suffer greatly from the effects of climate change as they are marginalised and discriminated against in every aspect of life. (Bianchi and Casafina, 2021, p. 283)

The following subparagraphs will show some examples of the fragmented nature of the contemporary world, and of those inequalities that, increasingly exacerbated and extreme, make the rules for the benefit of some and to the detriment of others.

Gender-based violence (GBV) and gender inequality relegate women – including trans women – and girls and LGBTQIA+ people to the lowest rung of society and expose them to the violation of major human rights, which may result in severe dangers: from mental and emotional suffering to sexual violence and death. On the threshold of 2023, the reality of the facts seems to downgrade to the rank of “good intentions” what, within the United Nations Agenda 2030, is considered to be the fifth among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030: to reach gender equality and empower all women and girls.

This is painfully evident if one takes, from the one side, the 5.2 target, whose aim is to “[e]liminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation”; and from the other side, the estimates provided by the World Health Organisation which state that around 736 million – 1 in 3 – women who were 15 or older in 2018 experienced physical or

sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner at least once across their lifetime (WHO, 2021). Violence against women is a global pandemic which takes advantage of the higher vulnerability of this segment of the population, fuelled and nurtured by the structural gender differences in society and the patriarchal-based power hierarchies that play in favour of the abuser. We will see, in the following paragraphs, how this view can be framed within the broader umbrella of anthroparchy.

A further contemporary paradox that comes into play against women's rights, pertains to the right to sexual and reproductive health. Although the right to sexual and reproductive health is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as in other international conventions, declarations and agreements (e.g. the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights), there are still many women in the world who do not have access to it, with devastating consequences. Indeed, the violation of these rights – which for example takes the form of the lack of freedom to decide on one's own body – kills at least 67,000 women every year (Oxfam, 2022). Even the definition of sexual health given by the World Health Organisation (WHO) calls for sexual and reproductive rights to be respected for all, and considers this to be the necessary condition if sexual health is to be guaranteed. Indeed, the WHO defines sexual health as

a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled. (WHO, 2021)

Also the 5.6 target of SDG 5 is to be added to – and ticked off from – the list of what, on paper and on the lips, sounds as a good idea to achieve in the shortest time. Indeed, it aims at ensuring

universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences. (UN General Assembly, 2015)

Once again, even this target risks being a little too ambitious – or even surrealistic – when compared to the current global situation and the timeframe it sets. As things stand, there are 24 countries¹ where abortion is illegal, under any circumstances, even when it is the woman's own life to be at risk. In 42 countries², abortion is only permitted if it is the only alternative to the woman's death. In another 51 countries³, women are only allowed to have an abortion if there are serious medical or therapeutic reasons (if the woman has been raped or if the fetus has malformations or is the result of an incestuous liaison).

In any case, there is no need to travel to unknown countries with hardly pronounceable names, equipped with a magnifying glass and a world map, or to go back centuries and centuries to unearth the obsolete laws and policies that are still clashing between women and their right over their bodies: shocking cases of violation of the right to decide for oneself are recent and are just happening before our western eyes.

On 24 June 2022 the U.S. Supreme Court has overturned *Roe v. Wade*, taking away the constitutional right to abortion and leading half of U.S. states to ban abortion outright. The people who will pay the heaviest price will be those who are already subjected to discrimination in access to healthcare, in particular people of colour, those in economic hardship, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, inhabitants of rural communities, etc. To the list of countries sketched in the footnotes, will soon, likely, be added South Dakota, Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi and Alabama, which are taking steps to make abortion illegal, entirely, in any situation. In the United States, 20 more states⁴ are going down this road (Center for reproductive rights, 2022). As regards Italy, in the *Bel Paese* the right to abortion enshrined in Law 194/78 is severely hindered by the very high number of conscientious objectors: in 2020, 64.6% of gynecologists, 44.6% of anesthetists and 36.2% of non-medical personnel presented conscientious objection (Ministero della Salute, 2022).

¹ Andorra, Aruba, Congo (Brazzaville), Curaçao, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Iraq, Jamaica, Laos, Madagascar, Malta, Mauritania, Nicaragua, Philippine, Palau, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Suriname, Tonga, Gaza Strip.

² Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brasil, Brunei, Chile, Ivory Coast, Dominica, Gabon, Gambia, Guatemala, Indonesia, Iran, Kiribati, Lebanon, Libya, Malawi, Mali, the Marshall Islands, Mexico, Micronesia, Burma, Nigeria, Oman, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, East Timor, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela, Yemen.

³ Algeria, Angola, Bahamas, Benin, Bolivia, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central Africa, Chad, Colombia, Comoros Islands, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Ecuador, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, eSwatini, Ghana, Grenada, Guinea, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Kuwait, Lesotho, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Malaysia, Mauritius, Monaco, Morocco, Namibia, Nauru, Niger, Pakistan, Peru, Poland, Qatar, South Korea, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Samoa, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Vanuatu, Zimbabwe.

⁴ Idaho, North Dakota, Wyoming, Utah, Arizona, Nebraska, Iowa, Texas, Louisiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia.

At a national level, out of 560 facilities with obstetrics and gynecology departments, those in which voluntary termination of pregnancy is practiced are only 357 (63.8% of the total). In Molise, out of 3 facilities, voluntary termination of pregnancy is practiced in only one; in Campania, out of 68 facilities, in 19 it is possible to terminate an unwanted pregnancy; in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, out of 7 facilities, only 2 allow access to this right (Ministero della Salute, 2022).

Thus, the consequences of gender inequality can also be found in the denial of what should be a fundamental right of a woman, escaping her subjectivity and control over her body, and landing in the conservative arms of a collective, controlling and dominating patriarchal conscience.

Hunger and malnutrition kill. It is estimated that some 2.1 billion people are dying of starvation (Oxfam, 2022). In 2020, 768 million people in the world faced hunger, of whom 418 million people live in Asia, 282 million people in Africa and 60 million in Latin America and the Caribbean (FAO, 2021). Although the Sustainable Development Goal 2 that United Nations had set should have taken us towards “Zero Hunger” by 2030, estimates tell us that some 660 million people will continue to suffer from hunger by that time (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2021).

Therefore, inequalities also permeate the food system, and the gap between those who starve, those who suffer from malnutrition, diabetes and obesity due to excessive consumption of processed food and those who, on the other hand, manage to have access to a balanced diet in terms of both quantity and quality, is wide.

As a telling example of the disparities within countries, the bottom 20% of the population in Malawi consumes on average 1,217 calories a day, and the top 20% consumes on average 3,294 calories a day (Rachel et al., 2019). Hunger crisis is fomented by the aftermath of conflict, the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the economic fallout brought about by the pandemic has further exacerbated inequalities from multiple points of view, being the final straw for those people already struggling with conflicts, climate change, poverty. Consider, for example, an increase in food prices which may go completely unnoticed by some and may cause a certain food product to become unaffordable for others. Or consider, for example, the segment of the population that was denied access to vaccinations against COVID-19.

The vaccine, indeed, is far from becoming a global public good to be offered to anyone, whatever income bracket they belong to, and its distribution has become hostage to the monopoly of pharmaceutical industries and the inaction of rich countries (Lawson and

Jacobs, 2022) and dedicated almost exclusively to the wealthiest. Indeed, it is estimated that with the current rate and pace of vaccination in low-income countries, they would only reach full coverage in about 60 years (Lawson and Jacobs, 2022).

It has also been calculated that during the first two years of the pandemic, the 10 richest men in the world doubled their wealth, while the income of 99% of the population suffered (Oxfam, 2022). Since the 1980s, wealth inequalities have increased almost everywhere in the world. The cause is to be found in the series of deregulation and liberalisation programmes which, depending on the country, were declined in different ways. The polarisation of wealth and income, and thus the resulting extreme inequality, was not homogeneous globally, but hit some countries harder than others. For example, United States, Russia and India experienced a decisive increase in internal income inequality. In other countries, such as China and Europe, the peaks were more moderate (Chancel et al., 2022).

As of today, it is estimated that the 10 richest men in the world – who are, in this order, from the richest to the poorest: Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Bernard Arnault and his family, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, Larry Page, Sergey Brin, Larry Ellison, Steve Ballmer and Mukesh Ambani (Forbes, 2021) – own more than the 3.1 billion people belonging to the poorest part of the population (Oxfam, 2022). As with ecological inequalities, income disparities also require an analysis within countries to unearth the deepest and most hidden financial paradoxes. In fact, talking about high-, middle- and low-income countries leaves one in the lurch: relying on these all-encompassing labels carries the risk of grossly levelling the entire population within those countries.

Although it is true that there are some countries that are actually quite equal in terms of income, such as Sweden, which is considered one of the most homogeneous countries in this respect both in Europe and worldwide, with the top 10% of the population earning just over 30% of the total national income and the bottom 50% earning almost 24% (Chancel et al., 2022), it is however true that within other countries there are extreme income disparities. In India, for example, the top 10% earns 20 times more than the bottom 50% and the top 1% owns 22% of the total national income.

In support of these data, we can refer to what was mentioned in the first part of the paragraph regarding the exponential growth of the wealth of the 10 richest men in the world during – and as a consequence of – the COVID-19 pandemic: in India, the billionaire Gautam Adani increased his fortune by a staggering 8 times during the first two years of the pandemic, significantly boosted by the fossil fuel sector and becoming the largest

producer of thermal energy from coal (Oxfam, 2022). This cue sets the tone for what will be explored later, namely, it is impossible to attribute the label of “victim” only to humans: the environment also suffers – and is affected by – such system of inequalities. The boundaries between human and non-human, as we will see in the next paragraphs and chapters, are fluid and permeable.

Inequality can also be glimpsed between those who can take advantage, to the point of overexploitation, of natural resources and those who can barely benefit from them; or between those who have no alternative but to live in an environment so polluted as to severely affect their health and those who finance the pollution, thus contributing the most to the inexorable environmental degradation, and can afford to relegate its side effects to an imaginary world, a distant future – a tedious tirade to which they only react with an annoyed roll of the eyes.

In this sense, we speak of ecological disparities and the line-up shows, on the one side, a minority of rich, industrialised countries that are not only responsible for generating most of the world's pollutant emissions, but that, for the most part, only enjoy the benefits of industrialisation and modernity, leaving the deadliest consequences to the other half of the field, which despite being numerically more substantial, does not play a major role in the production of pollutant emissions. If carbon dioxide emissions are taken as a reference in order to consciously identify – and point the finger at – the main culprits, it is first necessary to pin down their origin.

That human activities (of some human beings more than others) are the main contributors to global warming is now beyond doubt. Indeed, the latest report published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – the United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change – clearly states that greenhouse-gas emissions from human activities have been responsible for approximately 1.1°C of warming since 1850-1900 (IPCC, 2022). Indeed, emissions of climate-altering substances such as carbon dioxide (CO₂) and greenhouse gases such as methane (CH₄) and nitrogen oxides (NO_x) are generated by the combustion of fossil fuels found within industrial processes, certain agricultural processes and production, and are pushed up by phenomena such as deforestation.

While in 2020 we witnessed a reduction in the levels of CO₂ emitted into the atmosphere, in 2021 there was a rise to around 50 billion tonnes of CO₂ released into the atmosphere (Chancel et al., 2022). About three quarters of these emissions are the result of the combustion process of fossil fuels, of which 12% come from the agricultural sector,

9% from the industrial sector and 9% from waste management processes.

However, stating that, on average, each individual on the face of the earth is responsible for just over 6.5 tonnes of CO₂ per year would not do justice to the gravity of the inequality situation and would help to disguise who, far more than others, is responsible. Indeed, out of the total 2,450 billion tonnes of carbon that have released into the atmosphere since 1850, it is clear that shares of the responsibility are heavily skewed towards the more industrialised Western countries.

More specifically, in a comparison between countries, in descending order from the most polluting country, North America is responsible for 27% of the total emissions produced since 1850, Europe for 22%, China for 11%, South and South-East Asia for 9%, Russia and Central Asia for another 9%, East Asia (including Japan) for 6%, Latin America for 6%, MENA (Middle East and North Africa) for 6% and Sub-Saharan Africa for 4% (Chancel et al., 2022). The most vulnerable and poor countries, those who least contribute to climate change, are the most affected by the damage of the climate crisis on agriculture and food production. When tropical cyclone Amphan formed over the Indian Ocean on 16 May 2020 and struck Bangladesh, “40,894 latrines, 18,235 water points, 32,037 hectares of crops and vegetables, 18,707 hectares of fish cultivation area, 440 km of road, and 76 km of embankments were damaged” (IFRC, 2021). The people who made their living from animal husbandry, agriculture or fishing were the ones who paid the highest costs. In this specific context and historical moment, there were several factors of inequality that, when added together, worsened the situation even more: the healthcare system, which was already vulnerable, then burdened by the cases of COVID-19, was severely overwhelmed by the consequences of the cyclone.

By assessing the situation within countries and per capita, the results show an even greater disparity: if we consider the per-capita emissions of Sub-Saharan Africa and North America, one the opposite of the other in terms of quantities emitted, while the former has a level of 1.6 tonnes per person per year, the latter has 21 tonnes of emissions per capita per year, which is three times the world average (Chancel et al., 2022). Going even deeper in bringing inequalities to light, it is necessary to consider that obviously not all individuals, even if they belong to the same country, produce the same amount of climate-changing gases. If we take as an indicator the ecological footprint, within nations, of the top 10% of the population and the bottom 50% respectively, the inequalities in the generation of emissions emerge more clearly. For instance, in North America, people in the top 10% generate on average 73 tonnes of emissions per year, while those in the bottom 50% emit

on average 9.7 tonnes of emissions per year.

In Europe the situation is still different: the bottom 50% emits nearly 5 tonnes, the middle 40% around 10.5 tonnes, and the top 10% around 30 tonnes. By contrast, significantly lower emission levels are found in South and South-East Asia: from one tonne for the bottom 50% to fewer than 11 tonnes on average for the top 10% (Chancel et al., 2022). While the emissions of the richest are triggering and raising the flag of the climate crisis, on the other side of the coin the poorest and most vulnerable run the greatest risk when it comes to climate change, which, it is estimated, could claim 231,000 lives per year between now and 2030 among the world's poorest (Oxfam, 2022).

1.2 A tale of fossil-fuelled progress

How did we get to this polarised world? Inequality is never accidental or inevitable: “inequality is a political choice” (Chancel et al., 2022, p.11).

Looking back a few decades, before enthusiasm for progress began to wane in the face of the most devastating consequences of linear development, faith in modernity was total and pushed human beings to press the accelerator of economic growth to the limit, in the blind, axiomatic belief that modernity equals progress, equals development, equals wealth. The economic model that punctuated the rhythms of human society changed radically between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, whose starting point could be considered capitalism. This period saw the development of a system of thought, both economic and social, that catapulted mankind into an era of rapid economic and scientific development, marked by innovation and accompanied by a shared hope, not to say faith, in progress.

Although this development model is described as “linear”, its consequences are anything but linear, and the direction history and humanity take is anything but defined. The same concept of a globalised world, which aims at absolute and global standardisation, at making everything universal and simplified, suitable, available to and liked by everyone, also contributes to producing jarring contrasts in every corner of the globe: “In other words, globalisation does not lead to global homogeneity, but highlights a tension, typical of modernity, between the system world and the life-world, between the standardised and the unique, the universal and the particular” (Eriksen, 2016, p. 7).

And it is precisely within – and because of – this global interconnection, writes Eriksen,

that global crises are generated (Eriksen, 2016). Simplification is only a façade concealing a degree of complexity that makes the car we are pushing to its limits, or rather beyond its limits, ungovernable, and our direction unpredictable.

Humans overshoot the limits of the system. “To overshoot means to go too far, to go beyond limits accidentally – without intention” (Meadows et al., 2004, p. 1). There are three main causes or necessary and sufficient conditions behind this climax process recurring regardless of circumstances:

1. a rapid growth, an acceleration of processes takes place;
2. a limit exists which, if exceeded, endangers the equilibrium of the entire system;
3. there is a lack of awareness and/or an error of perception regarding the actual consequences of this acceleration (Ibidem).

As human beings, we tick off each of those conditions in several circumstances, facing devastating consequences. For example, we overshoot the limits when chemical companies produce more chemicals than the upper atmosphere can safely assimilate, leading to a depletion of the ozone layer that will last for decades; we overshoot the limits in terms of growth in the world population, thus more rapidly reaching another type of overshooting, that related to the use of the planet's natural resources.

Indeed, the linear economic model is based on the exploitation of natural resources without taking into account their finite nature, i.e. their actual availability in the long term, and without considering the consequences of this unstoppable natural drainage solely dedicated to profit. If natural resources are finite in nature, within a growth-oriented market economy “human needs are infinite” (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999, p. 55).

A pivotal example of the overstepping of limits and the devastating consequences that follow is the one represented by the Planetary Boundaries Framework (Rockström et al., 2009). The Planetary Boundaries Framework identifies the nine processes that regulate the stability and resilience of the Earth, presenting a set of nine planetary boundaries within which human society can carve out a safe operating space to continue developing for generations to come.

The planetary boundaries concern climate change, freshwater change, stratospheric ozone depletion, atmosphere aerosol loading, ocean acidification, biogeochemical flows (e.g., excessive phosphorus and nitrogen pollution from fertilizer use), novel entities (e.g., chemical pollutants, plastics, and heavy metals), land-system change (e.g., deforestation)

and biosphere integrity (i.e., extinction rate and loss of insect pollination) (Steffen et al., 2015).

Going beyond these limits means threatening the survival of human society itself, generating sudden and large-scale environmental changes. We are currently well outside the safety zone, having exceeded six of the nine limits, that is: climate change, biosphere integrity, biogeochemical cycles, land system change, novel entities and the water limit. The communication by scientists at the Stockholm Resilience Institute that the last two limits – novel entities and water – have been exceeded came as recently as January and April 2022, respectively (Wang-Erlandsson et al., 2022).

Thus, although we, as population, as well our economy, depend upon air, water, food, materials, and fossil fuels from the earth, we are severely testing the earth's ability to sustain us with these resources, as well as the ability of planetary sinks to absorb the pollution and waste we produce. As further evidence, every year since the late 1980s, a significant date falls on the global calendar: the World Overshoot Day marks the date when humanity has exhausted the biological resources that Earth regenerates during the entire year and – nonchalantly – begins to exploit those of the following year. At present, our hunger for unsustainable production must be satisfied with the resources of 1.75 Earths.

Keeping pace with this self-destructive climax, it is surprising how natural it is, on the threshold of 2023, to find a concordance and a fluid cause-and-effect relationship with the visions and images of the future as apocalyptic as they are prophetic and far-sighted, proposed in the past. I would like to quote, for example, the ominous omen about the future expressed at the end of the 18th century by Mary Wollstonecraft:

I anticipated the future improvement of the world, and observed how much man had still to do, to obtain of the earth all it could yield. I even carried my speculations so far as to advance a million or two of years to the moment when the earth would perhaps be so perfectly cultivated, and so completely peopled, as to render it necessary to inhabit every spot; yes; these bleak shores. Imagination went still farther, and pictured the state of man when the earth could no longer support him. (1796, pp. 275-276)

Back to the present times, Barca defines this period of great acceleration, industrialisation, marketing and economic growth as “an epoch of catastrophic earth-system changes” (Barca, 2020): what scientists call “the Anthropocene”. As a brief and unpretentious digression on the geological and etymological origins of this epoch, it must

be said that during the last 300 years, human activity has altered the global environment so much so as to make a formal shift from the relatively stable epoch of the Holocene to a new unstable human epoch. The Italian geologist and Catholic priest Antonio Stoppani in 1873 and V. I. Vernadsky in 1926 already acknowledged that humankind had become an agent of global change (Hamilton and Grinevald, 2015).

The word “Anthropocene” was coined by Eugene Stoermer in the 1980s, but it was only in 2002, with the publishing of a seminal essay by Paul J. Crutzen, that it gained popularity (Olsson et al., 2017). In Bruno Latour’s critical definition, Anthropocene is “[the era] in which humanity becomes one of the factors capable of influencing the entire planet, so much so that political, or rather political-scientific, assemblies are needed to assess the risks and find solutions commensurate with the magnitude of the problems” (2013, p. 64).

Although the Anthropocene is stratigraphically real, thus it should be defined as a geological epoch and formalized within the Geological Time Scale, it is not yet clear, from a geological point of view, when exactly the Holocene-Anthropocene transition took place. Indeed, in order to define its geologic and chronological boundaries, a “Global Strato-type Section and Point” (GSSP) – a globally synchronous marker that demonstrates the change – is needed. The contentious “golden spike” debate began with Crutzen and still continues today, becoming more and more controversial, giving rise only to extensively debated opinions and hypotheses, which nevertheless did not provide a GSSP marker.

In this epoch, human beings are called into question as the main responsible for contemporary environmental change with the charge of having altered the land surface, oceans and atmosphere. Whilst for decades change was synonymous with progress – the latter being associated, in its turn, with an idea of virtuous development and improvement – in the last few decades the belief in the progress has been damped and consciences – those of some at least – have awoken from the warmth of the comforts of modernity:

Modernity and enlightenment did not eradicate atavistic ideologies, sectarian violence and fanaticism. Wars continued to break out. Inequality and poverty did not go away. [...] What had been our salvation for 200 years, namely inexpensive and accessible energy, was about to become our damnation through environmental destruction and climate change (Eriksen, 2016, p. VII).

It is now understood that cheap and accessible energy based on fossil fuels will eventually lead to environmental destruction and climate change; that capitalist and industrial modernity is not a hero to be flattered; that the same conception of progress and

the idea of development has been distorted and denatured.

The voice of Stefania Barca (2020) definitely stands out from the chorus, harshly criticising the Anthropocene narrative. She considers it “a tale of fossil-fuelled progress” as well as “the latest chapter in an older mainstream narrative, that of modern economic growth”. Barca almost mocks this “Promethean tale” (2020), attributing to it characteristics and language similar to that of the Greek epic: a narrative voice, recurring and fixed formulas, and striking topoi and epithets. Finally, a hero impersonated by the personal pronoun *We*:

In the space of one generation, *We* is said to have reached the peak of its accomplishment, manifesting all its geological power: it now moves more rocks and sediments than all natural processes together and manages threequarters of the earth’s land surface. Here, the celebration becomes a gloomy account. It turns out that *We* is also emitting the highest levels of greenhouse gases in a million years, and is responsible for a hole in the ozone layer, the loss of biodiversity, the degradation of water systems, sea-level rises, ocean acidification and the near collapse of many earth-systems. All this testifies to the fact that *We* has entered a new geological epoch, one in which humanity is reshaping the earth. No need to despair, however: humanity is a force capable of great *creativity, energy and industry*. It has shaped the past, it is shaping the present, it can shape the future. *You and I* – the narrating voice concludes – are part of this story: we are the first generation to have realized our responsibility, that of finding a *safe operating space* within planetary boundaries, for the sake of future generations. *Welcome to the Anthropocene!* (Barca, 2020, pp. 8-9)

In her reproach, Barca unveils the paradox which lies cleverly behind the mainstream narrative of the Anthropocene, as well as behind the master narrative of modern economic and industrial growth: “[...] [T]he forces of production (science and industrial technology) are maintained as the only possible tool for understanding the errors and for repairing them. The system itself is not under question; its gender, class, spatial and racial inequalities are either invisible or irrelevant: no paradigm shift is necessary” (Barca, 2020, p. 12).

Donna Haraway, for her part, has scuttled the Anthropocene (as well as those of “Capitalocene” and “Plantationocene”), proposing instead to define our epoch by means of a neologism, which she herself coined: the “Chthulucene” (a word derived from the Greek *chthonic*, meaning “underground world”, “subterranean”, and the suffix *-cene*, which stands for “new, recent”). In contrast with the reality evoked by concept of Anthropocene,

Haraway contends, “[t]he Chtulucene is full of the opportunistic sym-poietic liveliness of our mortal planet. *Sympoiesis* is about making-with, becoming-with, rather than self-making through appropriation of everything as resource” (Haraway, 2018, p. 68).

Also Rachel Carson, whose life – spent as an environmental scientist, zoologist, university professor, writer and feminist – represented an example of the complexity of being human in the environment, as well as of the fluidity of boundaries, in *Silent Spring* wove together her love of nature and her radical critique of the science that imposes man’s dominion over nature, silencing it and causing its destruction: “As man proceeds toward his announced goal of the conquest of nature, he has written a depressing record of destruction, directed not only against the earth he inhabits but against the life that shares it with him. (Carson, 1962, p. 85).

This awareness and understanding of the other side of the Anthropocene favours the adoption of the perspective of those who are excluded from such a narrative; moreover, it makes it easier to understand the importance of giving them back a voice which must contrast with *Ours*, as we shall see in the next paragraph.

1.3 Human domination, or nature as a terra nullius

Anthropocene, Barca notes, “is nothing other than a master’s house: one that imprisons both human and non-human nature in order to make them work for capital” (Barca, 2020, p. 2). Barca considers “the official Anthropocene storyline” (Ivi, p. 5) as a hegemonic one since, adopted and endorsed by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and by the scientific community, it has influenced and guided global environmental decisions with far-reaching consequences, reaching beyond the lives of those who actually made the decisions and embracing those who are not in the decision-making arena. Indeed, it attributes this process of boundless destruction of the environment, followed by an eye-opening epiphany and a powerful redemption, to a *We* subject that is as unspecified as it is excluding. Behind this generalisation lies an exclusionary attitude and a willingness to deliberately omit the perspective of all those entities which, instead, have always opposed this organised ecocide. The voices and the faces of all those entities do not see the world with the “privileged eye of the white/male subject of history” (Ivi, p. 2) are hushed and hidden; in a nutshell, of those entities that remained outside the master’s house or of those that, entered inside the master’s house, but as victims. To overheat, to exploit, to exceed,

to go beyond, to challenge, to overshoot, are all words and expressions belonging to the anthropocentric vocabulary which perpetuate a single narrative of the humanity-nature relationship, the same narrative which places humanity and nature on the different sides of the boxing ring.

To be defined as “nature” in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the “environment” or invisible background conditions against which the “foreground” achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place. It is to be defined as a *terra nullius*, a resource empty of its own purposes or meanings, and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect, and to be conceived and moulded in relation to these purposes. It means being seen as part of a sharply separate, even alien lower realm, whose domination is simply “natural”, flowing from nature itself and the nature(s) of things (Plumwood, 1993, p. 4).

After all, it is the continuous human subjugation over nature that has laid the foundations of the Western concept of progress – meaning insatiable capital accumulation – and of property. It is here that the origins of the figure of the master are to be sought, in a context, that of Western thought, which shapes “a complex dominator identity” (Ivi, p. 5), overruling in terms of species, origin and gender. The dominant Western conception of the human-nature relationship matches with a hierarchical structure and a dualistic view of things, where equality and mutuality are not contemplated among the forms and types of relationship envisaged. According to Australian philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood, the deep root of hierarchical systems such as sexism, speciesism, colonialism and racism is to be found in the dualistic thinking, at the basis of which there is, on the one hand, an armed deployment against a hostile form of otherness; on the other, a presumption of primacy and supremacy. Below, I will refer to the examples that Plumwood (1993) includes in her list of contrasting pairs shaping the hierarchical global system of thought that employs, strengthens and exploits inequalities, from which the main forms of oppression, discrimination, and injustice arise:

- culture v. nature
- reason v. nature (but also reason v. matter and reason v. emotion)
- male v. female
- mind v. body
- master v. slave

- freedom v. necessity
- human v. nature
- civilised v. primitive
- universal v. particular
- public v. private
- subject v. object
- production v. reproduction
- self v. other

One overpowers and oppresses the other. The well-being of one excludes the well-being of the other. Reason silences irrationality. Man is the settler, nature his colony. Human as the predator, non-human as the prey. The one is at the complete disposal of the raids and prevarications of the other. Returning to the subject of dualisms, whereas the development of some has ancient origins, others belong to a more recent post-Enlightenment consciousness (Plumwood, 1993). In both cases, dualisms hardly fade away: the older contrasts stratify, sediment, blend, becoming part of the Western cultural substratum, the one that is hardest to eradicate; the newer contrasts feed the already heavy baggage of oppressions that humanity drags behind.

Cudworth (2005) refers to this variety and diversity of relationships “about intra-human and extra-human domination and the intricate patterns of such domination” (Cudworth, 2005, p. 2)– the lowest common denominator of which is a guards-and-thieves relationship – as “multiplicities of domination” (Ibidem). It now proves necessary, as well as logical – especially taking up the discussion mentioned earlier on the exclusivity and discrimination that certain all-encompassing terms bring with them – to open a parenthesis on Cudworth’s explanation of her use of the expression “human domination” (ibidem). As she writes, the expression does

[...] not mean to imply that all humans, in all places across time, are in dominatory relations to the environment, nor that all humans engage in exploitative and oppressive practices all of the time. “Humanity” is inevitably fractured by social and economic location and the interpenetration of cross cutting structures of various systems of domination mean that some groups of us are positioned in more potentially exploitative relations than others. In addition, individuals and collectivities choose not to exercise potential powers of domination and exclusion and also to contest them. (Cudworth, 2005, p.65)

To deepen and clarify the whole concept, we can draw on the term *anthroparchy*, which Cudworth proposed to refer to “a complex system of relationships in which the environment (i.e. living entities which are both themselves systems, and embedded in ecosystems) is dominated through formations of social organization, which privilege the human” (Cudworth, 2005, p. 64). Within this term, in fact, lies a structure that is made up of intricate systems of power relations.

First of all, it is essential to move away from any kind of generalisation or homologation, from that levelling operated by the Anthropocene narrative itself, which, as after the passage of a steamroller, flattens and imposes the same features and attributes the same actions and intentions to all. This exercise, although not easy to carry out, allows subjectivity to be reconfirmed and reality to be declined according to its different facets.

Thus, even forms of domination do not all have the same characteristics and do not all function in the same way. In this regard, one cannot fail to mention the role of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a conceptual framework that makes it possible to identify – and which aims to resolve and eliminate – a set of discriminations and inequalities that afflict a person, a group of people, and which therefore constitute a social problem. It takes into account people's overlapping identities and experiences to understand the complexity of the prejudices they have to deal with. It is therefore unfeasible to frame such complexity and variability through a generalising logic of domination. The transition from the term patriarchy to the term *anthroparchy*, made by Cudworth to describe the systemic domination of nature, can be explained with this need to find, in the terms, a key that may fit the degree of complexity of reality and forms and practices of power. According to Cudworth “[...] a system of gendered domination is intertwined in a multiplicity of systemic dominations based on various forms of difference” (Cudworth, 2005, p. 9). In this sense, the concept of patriarchy communicates a single system of domination, a dualistic view of reality that does not treat domination as it is: the product of interconnected and multiple systems, of different degrees and forms, intersecting in complex ways.

In her attempt to untangle the complexity of difference, Cudworth (2005) identifies three macro-categories of power practices which decline and diverge in terms of the level of intensity – over time, does it increase or decrease? – and modalities at which social domination operates, but also in terms of the species directly affected and of the victims of the power game: oppression, exploitation and marginalisation.

Oppression comes in different forms depending on the characteristics of the species it

affects. As an example, oppression is suffered by the animals which, in terms of biology and sensitivity, are closest to man. *Exploitation* has a wider spread. We refer to exploitation of soil, water resources, energy, but also of farm animals, racehorses, animals in circuses, etc. In short, exploitation applies to all those entities, both living and non-living, whose use is bent to the mere human purpose, for the satisfaction of human ends. The form of human domination whose meaning has the highest rate of incidence and diffusion is *marginalisation*: it pushes to the margins, excludes, alienates.

To recognise the existence of these forms of human domination is the necessary first step to make develop a new model of thinking that is integrative and not exclusionary and has an equalitarian and non-hierarchical structure. Picking up on the feminist question asked by Barca (2020): where are the forces of reproduction in the Anthropocene narrative? According to Barca, “[...] history consists in a struggle of other-than-master subjects for producing life, in its autonomy from capital and freedom of expression, a struggle that opposes the unlimited expansion of the master’s rule.” (Barca, 2020, p. 5). In this regard, to build a counter-hegemonic narrative based on the perspective of those who have always been caring for the earth through both everyday actions becomes a feminist and ecological political action and expression. The paradigm of growth, writes Barca (2020), “can only function by hiding the social (human) costs of capitalist/industrial modernity” (Ivi, p. 12). And this cost, as mentioned in the first paragraph, is to be counted in numbers of both human and non-human victims, oppressed, exploited, marginalised. Inequality kills, we said. Now we can add: inequality – born in the bosom of shameless capitalist, anthroparchal, industrial growth – kills, and it does it differently and targeting differently positioned lives. The destruction of the environment, as we said, goes hand in hand with the violation of human rights: Carson, too, in her attempt to warn about the use of chemical insecticides, and poisonous, polluting, carcinogenic and lethal substances for both humans and nature, pointed to the link between the poisoning of the earth and the suppression of the human rights of other-than-master subjects, which in this case (as well as in the case of tropical cyclone Amphan discussed earlier), is represented by farmers:

We have subjected enormous numbers of people to contact with these poisons, without their consent and often without their knowledge. If the Bill of Rights contains no guarantee that a citizen shall be secure against lethal poisons distributed either by private individuals or by public officials, it is surely only because our forefathers, despite their considerable wisdom and foresight, could conceive of no such problem. (Carson, 1962, p. 65)

The concept of trans-corporeality advocated by Stacy Alaimo – which will be further explored and proven through case studies in chapter four – reflects and supports the thesis according to which it is not possible to consider the environment as a “mere background”: “Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2).

The environment permeates the human and the human impregnates the environment. Under no circumstances can they be considered impermeable and impenetrable to each other. Just as human domination is composed of intertwined systems that touch and influence and overlap one another, breaking down any semblance of a dualistic boundary, so too “the boundaries between our flesh and the flesh of the world of which we are part and in which we are, are, porous” (Tuana, 2008, p. 198).

It is in the reaffirmation and vindication of this porous promiscuity and of relationalities that the ecofeminist perspective operates. With the aim of questioning the hegemonic narrative of the Anthropocene, pursuing environmental justice and dismantling “the master strategies of nullification” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 191), the ecofeminist standpoint brings to light, as in the case of Carson with the US farmers (but also with their families, the community, the birds, the waterways, the fishes, the soil, and so on), the other-than-master subjects. All this takes on greater significance when considering that, as Barca writes, making the forces of reproduction visible “might help us develop a significantly new understanding of our epochal challenges” (Barca, 2020, p. 3).

Indeed, the ecofeminist standpoint and experience allow to forge new tools and narratives to fight both social and environmental injustices, giving back a voice and semblance to those whose voices and semblances had been taken away and held hostage by the overbearing and levelling Western-style modernity. Only in this way is it possible to give the forces of reproduction back their right to exist, to be and be there as “other-than-industrial ways of interacting with the biosphere” (Ivi, p. 37), and the dignity hitherto trampled on by the forces of production, privileged by the Anthropocene storyline as the “key historical agency of the last 250 years” (Ibidem). Therefore, the aim of the next chapters is to reclaim a *her/story* of coexistence and kinship from a *his/story* of conquests and control – the latter being regarded for millennia as collective communal memory, when it actually erased and silenced half of humankind (Nadotti, 2022).

In the next chapters we will see how ecofeminism pursues this aim through alternative

narrative proposals such as that by that by Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, by Caroline Merchant – who introduces the concept of “partnership” – or that by Greta Gaard, who proposes the concept of the “ecofeminist ecological self”. Returning to the notion of “multiplicities of domination” by Cudworth (2005) – according to which “a system of gendered domination is intertwined in a multiplicity of systemic dominations based on various forms of difference” – and to the notion of porous promiscuity and mutual permeability between humans and the environment, the human domination of nature and domination of women emerge as closely connected.

Using the words of Mies and Shiva (1993) and developing their view further, “the rape of the Earth and rape of women are intimately linked – both metaphorically, in shaping world-views, and materially, in shaping women’s everyday lives”.

Therefore, we will see how women became paladins of environmental justice, actively contributing to the development of an alternative narrative and to the undoing of the anthroparchal matrix, as well as fighting marginality and structural subalternity. In conclusion, picking up the statement by Carol Hanisch (1969) – “personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution” (Hanisch, 1969, p. 4) – and declining it through an ecofeminist understanding, it can be said that the collectivity which ecofeminism encompasses goes beyond the boundaries of women worldwide and beyond human boundaries: it embraces the whole world in its complexity by redefining what it really means to be human beings.

2. Ecofeminist polyphony

This is a land where there is no hierarchy, among humans or between humans and animals, where people care for one another and for nature, where the earth and the forest retain their mystery, power and wholeness, where the power of technology and of military and economic force does not rule the earth, or at least that part of it controlled by women. (Plumwood, 1993, p. 7).

It is possible that the meaning of ecofeminism is not immediately crystal clear to those who, for the first time, see this bi-composite term appear before their eyes or reach their ears. As much as it may seem, at first glance, to be a niche topic, ecofeminism encompasses many subjects and its thinking touches on many fields closer to our everyday lives than one might think.

Ecofeminism can be found in the kitchen, among ethical recipe books that are also good for cholesterol and glass jars containing agar agar; Ecofeminism is outside the gates of the Maggiolina city park in La Spezia, in the anti-speciesism of those who manned the entire area for a fortnight under the August summer sun. They managed to obtain an alternative happy ending to that of death for two female wild boars named Perla and Amara and their puppies, locked up in the park at dawn after an unfortunate night raid in the Golfo dei Poeti city centre.

Ecofeminism can also be found in the opposition to the stereotyped, immutable and dualistic view of gender roles rooted in contemporary Western society, in which “men are defined as active, women as passive; men are intellectual, women are intuitive; men are inexpressive, women emotional; men are strong, women weak; men are dominant, women submissive, etc.” (Jaggar, 1993, p. 316).

Ecofeminism lies rather in the fluidity and interchangeability of emotions, appearance, sexuality, corporeity, ways of behaving, and professions: it opposes the forced attribution of a caring, reproductive and homemade motherhood role to women, just as it opposes that masculinity – imposed and worshipped by certain “real men’s” magazines and razor and aftershave cream advertisements on TV – marked by

Euro-Western cultural constructions [...] as predicated on themes of maturity-as-separation, with

male self-identity and self-esteem based on dominance, conquest, workplace achievement, economic accumulation, elite consumption patterns and behaviors, physical strength, sexual prowess, animal “meat” hunting and/or eating, and competitiveness. (Gaard, 2017, p. 163)

This fluid and overflowing ubiquity reminds us that the nature of ecofeminism is intersectional and its approach is dynamic. The ecofeminist position goes beyond women’s claim to political and economic rights equal to those of men, just as it goes beyond proposing an alternative feminist culture to the masculinist one.

The prerogative of ecofeminism is to unhinge stereotypes and overcome discriminatory patterns, deconstruct monolithic conceptions, fight socio-environmental battles, and weave bonds of interdependence between humans and the environment: “The core [of Ecofeminism] is interconnectedness, hence the crossing of boundaries between human and natural, between human and non-human: a concept, if you like, dense with spiritual overtones but also inherently political and subversive” (Bianchi and Casafina, 2021, p. 52). The connection and dialogue between what is social and what is natural is increasingly taking place in the debates between the humanities and the environmental sciences. In particular, environmental history is influenced by this communicative intertwining of human societies and the environment in which they develop, in an attempt to incorporate the non-human world into our understanding of social, economic, political and cultural change over time.

Accordingly, relations of domination of class, gender, species, race, health and welfare conditions, as well as the links of interdependence between human and non-human life forms are doubly intertwined with the environment and trigger controversial moral dilemmas covering material as well as cultural and political aspects.

As a continuation of what was mentioned in chapter one with respect to the complexity of the human being – and of being human – in the environment, and as a preview with respect to the case studies I will propose in chapter four, human beings are an influential and influencing part of the environment, extremely vulnerable and exposed on the one hand, representing a powerful ecological agent on the other.

As already mentioned, environmental risks cannot be considered equally distributed within society and across the longitudes and latitudes of the globe: relations of domination operate in such a way that the burden falls on the shoulders of minorities and the most vulnerable. The latter cannot afford the luxury of seeing nature as exclusively a place of leisure and amenity. Thus, for them, nature cannot be the only goal to protect, to fight for.

On the contrary, nature becomes a painful, daily field of battle in which exhausting

struggles for social justice and fundamental rights are regularly conducted. In such a context, Ecofeminism brings together the struggles for social and environmental justice by restoring a central role to the concept of life and resting its foundations on an axiom that will also be expressed in Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development: “[W]omen have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development” (United Nations General Assembly, 1992, p. 4).

2.1 Roots of Ecofeminism

Although Ecofeminism began to take shape as a philosophical current in the mid-1970s, its roots go back much further and can be traced back to the American Ellen Swallow, who first used the term ecology in a modern key. Ellen Swallow, a safety engineer and environmental chemist, as well as an expert in mineralogy and nutrition, used the term “human ecology” in 1892. The information I propose in the next few lines is taken from the work that Caroline Hunt, Swallow’s friend and biographer, published in 1912.

Swallow was born in 1842 in the isolated, rural community of Dunstable, Massachusetts. She spent her childhood in the farm of her parents, both of whom were teachers. A non-formal, family-oriented education, taking place within the home, was deemed more appropriate for her. Considered a frail and sick child, the outdoors and exercise was what her doctor insistently advised her to do. She helped around the house and occasionally filled the shelves of her room with prizes won at local country fairs.

Her educational pursuit began in a more formal and institutional sense only in 1859, when her parents sold the farm to open a store in the nearby town of Westford, and she, in her 17th year, enrolled at Westford College. She showed a keen interest – as well as a particular aptitude – for scientific subjects, a field in which she sought opportunities for higher education, but also a field that in the 1860s opened its doors mainly to males. The Vassar College for Women in Poughkeepsie, New York, gave her the chance she was looking for through a pioneering scientific studies programme for women, which she enrolled in at the age of 26. Her abilities, which emerged in the entrance exam, gave her direct access to the third year. The next step was to become the first woman admitted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Ellen Swallow, as we said, first used the term human ecology in a modern key in November 1892, on the occasion a grand opening at the Boot and Shoe Club in Boston,

considering it as “the study of the surroundings of human beings in the effects they produce on the lives of men. The features of the environment are natural – such as climate – and artificial, produced by human activity, such as noise, dust, poisonous vapors, vitiated air, dirty water and unclean food” (Richards, 1907, p. 33).

Ellen considered elements such as the purity of water, air and the quality of food as the fundamentals of ecology or “home economics”. However, home economics was not limited to activities such as cooking or ironing: home economics was a practical science and a study of everyday human life. Ellen defined it as “[t]he study of the laws, conditions, principles, and ideals which are concerned on the one hand with man’s immediate physical environment and on the other hand with his nature as a social being, and is specially the study of the relation between these two factors” (Lake Placid Conference on Home Economics, 1902, p. 70).

The person who half a century later picked up the baton of the study of the environment inaugurated in the United States by Ellen Swallow, and who relaunched the American environmental movement on a new and even firmer foundation, was Rachel Carson (1907-1964). In 1962, two years before her death, Carson published the groundbreaking fruit of years of research, *Silent Spring*: initially in serial form in the “New Yorker”, and then as a separate volume. The reflections contained in this work are considered as a turning point in the history of ecological thought, and, well after the year of her death, they caused a stir within those consciences that had still remained drowsy and numb.

Here was a scientist accusing science. Hers was a denunciation against the indiscriminate use of pesticides in a disturbingly silent, dystopian (but not overly so) fairy-tale scenario that brought to light a truth that was already before the eyes – and audible to the ears – of all. The – deadly – consequences fall on both human and animal life. Humans are an integral part of an ecosystem that is as fragile as it is complex. No pedestal lies beneath their shoes, only mud and soil. Human and non-human animals, Carson explains, both derive from the sea, and their bond is based on a common genesis of their existence. The process of cell division, common to all living things, from the yeast cell to the human being, binds them: “[...] [N]either man nor amoeba, the giant sequoia nor the simple yeast cell can long exist without carrying on this process of cell division” (Carson, 1962, p. 210).

From *Silent Spring* arises both a strong love for nature and a blunt criticism of modern science: the blind desire to dominate nature is killing us all. On the occasion of the awarding of the Schweitzer Medal by the Animal Welfare Institute in January 1963, Carson

pronounced these words: “What is important is the relation of man to all life. This has never been so tragically overlooked as in our present age, when through our technology we are waging war against the natural world. It is a valid question whether any civilization can do this without losing the right to call itself civilised” (quoted in Brooks, 1963, p. 316).

In short, although Carson did not call herself a feminist, her defiance of imposed hierarchical divisions and her relocation of humans within nature leaves an indelible imprint by contributing to a feminist and ecological understanding of the world, in which life, as well as that which threatens it, is shared with and among all human and non-human animals.

It is through this message that Carson leaves her mark and passes the baton not only to the feminist anti-nuclear movements (it should be remembered that the first chemical agent mentioned and accused in *Silent Spring* – strontium-90 – is not a pesticide, but a radioactive isotope of strontium produced by the nuclear fission of uranium), but also to the pacifists, animal rights activists and environmentalists who appeared on the American scene shortly afterwards, guided by an increasingly solid awareness: there is a link between domination over nature and different (later seen as intersectional) forms of oppression ranging from gender, race, class to species. This “rejection” of technology/patriarchal technocracy, it may be anticipated here, is indeed a leitmotif of Ecofeminism, and often of feminism *tout court* (socialist above all), except for Techno- and Cyberfeminism, for obvious reasons.

In the 1960s, specifically in 1961, the Women Strike for Peace (WSP) movement came onto the scene in the United States. The WSP was born when about 50,000 American housewives in their 30s and 40s from more than 60 US communities decided to go on strike, organising a national day of protest for peace to the shout, addressed to newly elected President John F. Kennedy, of “End the arms race, not the human race” (Swerdlow, 1993, p. 1). The goal was quite simple, and those who demanded it were unwilling to compromise: these women were clamouring for world peace and control over the use of nuclear weapons.

What distinguished the Women Strike for Peace from other movements was its refusal to organise itself according to a hierarchical internal structure. The local groups were autonomous, the activists defined themselves as a group far from politics and close to the domestic sphere. Indeed, as proof and spark to their fury against nuclear weapons, they brought strontium-90 to trial whose traces had been found in baby milk. Carson already wrote about this threatening isotope: “Strontium 90, re-leaked through nuclear explosions

into the air, comes to earth in rain or drifts down as fallout, lodges in soil, enters into the grass or corn or wheat grown there, and in time takes up its abode in the bones of a human being, there to remain until his death” (1962, p. 6). As mentioned above, the role they play is not intentionally political. Indeed, they showed what they were: mothers concerned about the health of their children, who left the home, but somehow took it with them and used it as a banner: they took to the streets in protest cradling babies and pushing prams (Swerdlow, 1993).

In a historical era, that of the Cold War, in which everything revolved around the political, ideological and military opposition and rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Women Strike for Peace movement demonstrated its political distance and impartiality by sending exactly identical letters to both Jacqueline Kennedy and Nina Khrushchev (Ibidem). The invitation was the same: let your husbands act for peace!

The French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne is the first to imprint the term Ecofeminism in a written work. It is the 1974 writing *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (“Feminism or Death”). D'Eaubonne blames the world's overpopulation, hence the depletion of natural resources, on patriarchal power and sees the synthesis and union of ecology and feminism as an urgent planetary need: “[...] [W]e know that, above all, we need urgently to remake the planet around a totally new model. This is not an ambition, this is a necessity; the planet is in danger of dying, and we will die along with it” (d'Eaubonne, 2022, p. 191). In her work, the concept of *feminitude*, i.e., the tragic condition of being a woman subjected to patriarchal culture, is clearly distinguished from femininity in the analysis of the contradiction whereby women, although representing the “biological majority of the species” (p. 18), are “placed between parentheses and separated in the way that oppressed minorities are” (Ibidem).

Thus, the theme of women's oppression emerges parallel to the oppression of nature, just as the theme of the freedom of one's own body and reproductive capacity bursts forth in the invocation of the fall of the *phallocracy* (Ibidem). Indeed women, d'Eaubonne writes, free themselves from their condition of subordination to the patriarchal empire through the breaking of the chains of reproductivity as a gendered obligation, thus through the reaffirmation of sexual and reproductive rights, including abortion and contraception. The fertility of women is intertwined with the fertility of the planet. Indeed, women act as the engine of change, combating at the same time the uncontrolled growth of the population as well the domination over their bodies.

Four years after the book's publication, the author founded the *Écologie et Féminisme*

movement, which, despite its limited success in France, achieved great popularity in Australia and in the United States. Although it was thanks to the pioneering work of d'Eaubonne that Ecofeminism found its name, the movement was already taking shape, acting in different parts of the globe with the conviction that, thanks to their struggles, "human beings would finally be regarded as persons and not first and foremost as males or females. And our planet, close to women, would become verdant again for everyone" (p. 251).

Indeed, almost at the same time as the publication of *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, the Chipko movement, or Chipko Andolan, was born in India among the communities of the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand (then part of Uttar Pradesh). Founded and carried forward by the visions and actions of extremely courageous women such as Mira Behn, Sarala Behn, Bimala Behn, Hima Devi, Gauri Devi, Gunga Devi, Bachni Devi, Itwari Devi and Charnun Devi, the movement stands in opposition to the model of forest management and exploitation based solely on profit, which destroyed the environment and trampled on the rights of the local inhabitants, dispossessing them of what was their primary source of livelihood, the management of which was based on indigenous environmental knowledge.

Highly significant and also extremely forward-looking and topical, if we think of the consequences in the relationship of domination between man and the environment, are the words that Sarala Behn writes in 1980, in her *A Blueprint for Survival of the Hills*, a Supplement to "Himalaya: Man and Nature" edited by Himalaya Seva Sangh:

We must remember that the main role of the hill forests should be not to yield revenue, but to maintain a balance in the climatic conditions of the whole of northern India and the fertility of the Gangetic Plain. If we ignore their ecological importance in favour of their short-term economic utility, it will be prejudicial to the climate of northern India and will dangerously enhance the cycle of recurring and alternating floods and droughts. (Behn, in Shiva 2016, p. 71)

Not only do forests preserve environmental stability, they also safeguard human stability. The interdependence between human beings and nature and their belonging to the same ecosystem are traditionally recognised and established principles.

Again, in the years when d'Eaubonne was baptising Ecofeminism, in the United States, in the state of New York, at Niagara Falls, protests were breaking out against those responsible for the atrocious pollution in the once pleasant and charming district of Love Canal. The neighbourhood takes its name from the canal on which it stands, which was built in 1890 by the entrepreneur William T. Love, and from 1920 was used as a landfill site

for municipal waste, being awarded the title of storage site for drums containing industrial waste by the Hooker Electrochemical Company in 1942 (Innocent, 2017). It was finally landfilled in 1953. The dust, so to say, was swept under the carpet. To be precise, under the “carpet” – buried at a depth of twenty to twenty-five feet (6 to 7.5 meters) – there were almost 22,800 short tons (19,800 tons) of chemicals, mostly composed of products such as “caustics, alkalines, fatty acid and chlorinated hydrocarbons resulting from the manufacturing of dyes, perfumes, and solvents for rubber and synthetic resins” (Blum, 2008, p. 22). On top of the “carpet”, from the year immediately following, an entire neighbourhood was built – deluded, betrayed, polluted, poisoned – along with all its inhabitants. Lois Marie Gibbs led the protests after discovering that his son’s health problems were directly related to the local elementary school he attended, which was built right above the canal and where he was exposed to dangerous chemicals on a daily basis.

The link between women and the environment, the need to take up arms and side with other women, other species, the environment, people, expressed by d’Eaubonne can also be found in the anti-nuclear protests which in those years were responding to the partial meltdown of a nuclear power plant in central Pennsylvania. In March of the spring of 1979, the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant on the west coast of the United States, Pennsylvania, along the Susquehanna River, was the scene of the most serious accident ever at a US nuclear power plant, classified as level 5 on the International Atomic Energy Agency’s International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale. The scale ranges from level 0 – defined as “deviation” with no safety significance – to level 7, corresponding to “major accident”. Although current circumstances and historical-political dynamics threaten a worrying development on the nuclear front, to date only two events have ranked this high: Chernobyl and Fukushima. At level 5 are the accidents with wider consequences – four, so far – including that of Three Mile Island.

The collective awareness that arose following the terrifying event did not only manifest itself through protests and demonstrations in the streets: the Three Mile Island incident led a large number of women to gather and participate in Amherst in March 1980 in what was the first ecofeminist conference, entitled “Women and Life on Earth: A Conference on Eco-Feminism in the Eighties”. Interdependence as the basis of Ecofeminism returned, and there, the thread linking feminism, militarisation, healing and ecology was discussed. As Ynestra King, one of the conference organisers, writes:

We are a woman-identified movement and we believe we have a special work to do in these

imperilled times. We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way. (Mies and Shiva, 1993, p. 14)

That same year, Hartford, in Connecticut, New York and the state of Vermont were the scene of other women's meetings aimed at discussing and reflecting on the interdependencies between ecology, patriarchy, militarism and racism. It was a forge of ideas, a laboratory, an incubator of a theory that would soon turn into a political action which would make a profound mark on the pacifist and anti-nuclear movements. Aggressing the environment meant directly attacking women and their bodies. I will elaborate on these episodes of environmental justice, as well as others, in chapter four.

In 1980, the publication of Carolyn Merchant's work *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* gave a decisive breakthrough to ecofeminist thinking. As an American ecofeminist philosopher and historian of science, Merchant identifies the scientific revolution of the 17th century as the period when science began to atomise, objectify and dissect nature. She shows that the modern natural sciences, first and foremost mechanics and physics, are rooted in and developed through the destruction and degradation of natural resources, based on the domination of humans over nature, understood as a living organism and as feminine; an organism to be controlled, decomposed, dissected and recomposed.

Nature is regarded as a dead raw material that obeys the will of humans and which humans can dispose of at will. In this regard, it is also worth recalling what Carson wrote about the most worrying drifts of modern science, which persists in subjugating nature and putting it under hostage:

The control of nature is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man. The concepts and practices of applied entomology for the most part date from that Stone Age of science. It is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth. (Carson, 1962, p. 297)

Merchant, in her work, demonstrates that this domination over Mother Earth follows a

historical development steeped in violence and progress whose roots can be traced back to the figure of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) who, as the father of the concept of the modern research institute and industrial science, laid the philosophical foundations of the experimental and scientific method in England. In this regard, Mies and Shiva express themselves as follows:

[...] [I]t was he who called for the subordination, suppression, and even torture of nature, to wrest her secrets from her, analogous to the witch-hunts which also took place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What is more, Bacon was not only the inventor of the new empirical method based on experimentation, he also advised the new heroes of natural science to brush aside all the old taboos without a qualm and to expose them as superstitions with which people had hitherto surrounded Mother Earth, for example, the taboo against driving mines into the womb of Mother Nature in order to get sought-after metals. (Mies and Shiva, 1993, p. 44)

Although Harding's position is more nuanced and not as anti-tech as Shiva's, she also comes down hard on modern science, supporting the definition Shiva gives of it: "[A] masculine and patriarchal project which necessarily entailed the subjugation of both nature and women" (Shiva, 1988, p. 34) and by adding that it was a "western, bourgeois, masculine project" (Harding, 1986, p. 8). The voice of Keller, too, joins the invective against modern science:

Science has been produced by a particular sub-set of the human race, that is, almost entirely by white, middle class males. For the founding fathers of modern science, the reliance on the language of gender was explicit; they sought a philosophy that deserved to be called "masculine", that could be distinguished from its ineffective predecessors by its "virile" powers, its capacity to bind Nature to man's service and make her his slave. (Keller, 1985, p. 7)

All in all, according to them, the new science had the merit of affirming the supremacy of human beings over nature, reducing the latter to mere inert matter, a laboratory guinea pig, as well as defining a clear boundary between reason and emotion: scientific thought dissociated man from woman and from nature, and feminised nature and naturalised women. It is on the study of Merchant that Sylvia Bowerbank in her *Speaking for Nature* relies to bring to the surface and enhance that feminist ecological thinking that until then, in the English context of the modern age, was still not widespread: that of giving a voice to nature.

Indeed, by strategically utilising the association between women and nature corroborated during and by the scientific revolution, women stand as advocates for none other than Mother Nature and the entire natural world. The aim was to combat the idea of nature as a mere mechanical distributor of resources. At the end of her book, Bowerbank took up Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) – the mother of the author of *Frankenstein*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley – who wrote two works that are considered milestones of modern feminism and in which the seeds of an *ante litteram* Ecofeminism can be glimpsed germinating. In 1792 she published *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In the work, Wollstonecraft declares war on the customs and forms of hierarchy of the time that prevent women from realising themselves as individuals and argues for equality of men and women. In 1796, she published *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*. In her work, Wollstonecraft draws an analysis that, although based on eighteenth-century society and women's roles, is as relevant and forward-looking as ever. This radical and innovative aspect is evident on the one hand in its alarmed awareness of the damage that progress based on the accumulation of capital causes:

A man ceases to love humanity, and then individuals, as he advances in the chase after wealth; as one clashes with his interest, the other with his pleasures: to business, as it is termed, every thing must give way; nay, is sacrificed; and all the "endearing charities of citizen, husband, father, brother, become empty names. (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 433)

On the other hand, it appears clearly in the frustration and anger expressed by the author at the oppression of the female in relation to the male, as in this passage, in which despair emerges at the already sealed fate of her daughter:

You know that as a female I am particularly attached to her — I feel more than a mother's fondness and anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex. I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. With trembling hand I shall cultivate sensibility, and cherish delicacy of sentiment, lest, whilst I lend fresh blushes to the rose, I sharpen the thorns that will wound the breast I would fain guard — I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit — Hapless woman! what a fate is thine! (Wollstonecraft, 1796, pp. 190-191)

Wollstonecraft writes that "the tyranny of wealth is still more galling and debasing than that of rank" (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 324): under its weight, nature is in convulsions, and

the future driven by modern industry carries on a destructive and degrading plan in which there is no longer any room for life. In a painful – almost mournful – effort, Wollstonecraft turns her gaze to the future. It is in this context and state of mind that the world appears to her as a “vast prison” (Wollstonecraft, 1796, p. 276), and man a prisoner on death row.

2.2 A new ethic of earthcare

Once again, we will take a leap forward from the eighteenth century back to the present – that same present foreshadowed by Wollstonecraft – to dwell on another of the contributions of Merchant: that relating to the concept of the *partnership ethic of Earthcare*. Merchant first illustrates the concept of partnership in the epilogue to *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* of 1996. Sixteen years after the publication of *The Death of Nature*, the concept of partnership seems almost like an armistice in the midst of the war declared by humans against nature whose opening salvo is the invasion – or revolution – of science. As if having before her eyes two colonels at the head of two opposing armies who must learn to listen to each other and dialogue for the common good, Merchant points out good practices and norms to achieve a lasting peace agreement:

Consensus and negotiation should be attempted as partners speak together about the short-and long-term interests of the interrelated human and nonhuman communities. The meetings will be lengthy and may continue over many weeks or months. As in any partnership relationship, there will be give and take as the needs of each party are expressed, heard, and acknowledged. If the partners identify their own ethical assumptions and agree to start anew from a partnership ethic of mutual obligation and respect, there is hope for consensus. Indeed, there is no other choice, for failure means a regression from consensus, into contention, and thence into litigation. A partnership ethic will not always work, but it is a beginning, and with it there is hope. (Merchant, 2003, p. 244)

Thus, the partnership ethic is – if it succeeds – a cease-fire that takes place following an enlightened compromise, a long and almost wearisome negotiation in which the parties come together and listen to each other, a difficult balance between conceding and sacrificing one thing and demanding another. Although they start from different positions, human beings and nature are united by a goal that drives them to act together: the sustainable development of the planet, the preservation of all forms of life. A goal for sustainable development, one would say today, that precedes both the 17 Sustainable

Development Goals that the United Nations engraved in the 2030 Agenda in 2015, and the eight Millennium Development Goals, signed by the same hands at the beginning of the new millennium.

What is certain is that between the goals set by the United Nations and what Merchant is striving for there is an obvious commonality of purpose: an action plan for a sustainable future. Although this common thread exists and is obvious even from the title Merchant gives to the epilogue in which she unravels the concept – *Partnership Ethics: Earthcare for a New Millennium* – the reflection to which she now leads both witnesses and signatories to the recent World Agendas for Sustainable Development is that

to end poverty in all its forms everywhere (1), to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture (2), to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages (3), to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (4), to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (5), to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all (6), to ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all (7), to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (8), to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation (9), to reduce income inequality within and among countries (10), to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (11), to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns (12) to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts by regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy (13), to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development (14), to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss (15), to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (16) and to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development (17) (United Nations General Assembly, 2015)

it is first necessary to change the opposing and irreconcilable view we have of nature and the human, uniting the human community and the non-human community in a relationship based on mutual benefit and cooperation.

In continuity with what Val Plumwood argued (1993) – namely that kindness and solidarity, and not authority and domination, should be the basis of the concept of relationship – nature should no longer be perceived exclusively as “more powerful than

and dominant over human beings (whether as goddess or witch), as was usually the case in premodern societies” (Merchant, 1986, p. XIX), just as the human should no longer be conceived as “dominant over nature through science and technology, as has been the view of most modern societies” (Ibidem). To ensure that the time trajectory of the world proceeds towards a future that is sustainable for all parties, this is, among the many that follow, reset, and expire with respect to the given timeframe, *the* goal for sustainable development to be set in the Agenda of the postmodern society. The mutually beneficial collaboration of human beings as part of nature that is established as a possible relational alternative to a relationship of domination in which the human being imposes himself on nature is however not the only characteristic that describes the idea of partnership. Inevitably, three adjectives that belong as much to the human as to nature intervene to mark the rhythms of this relationship: real, active, alive. Thus, this peaceful, docile, almost sleepy bond between human and non-human communities is transformed into “a dynamic relationship” (Ibidem) in which an also dynamic balancing of mutual needs takes place:

Each has power over the other. Nature, as a powerful, uncontrollable force, has the potential to destroy human lives and to continue to evolve and develop with or without human beings. Humans, who have the power to destroy nonhuman nature and potentially themselves through science and technology, must exercise care and restraint by allowing nature’s beings the freedom to continue to exist, while still acting to fulfill basic human material and spiritual needs. (Ibidem)

Merchant is very clear in distinguishing her partnership ethics from what she identifies as the three main forms of environmental ethics regulating the relationship between human and non-human: the egocentric ethics, meaning “the idea that what is good for the individual, or the corporation acting as an individual, is good for society as a whole” (Merchant, 1986, p. 212); the homocentric ethics, which means “a utilitarian ethic based on the precept of the greatest good for the greatest number of people” (Merchant, 1986, p. 214); and the ecocentric, or biocentric (but also a-biocentric since it includes not only the biotic, but also the abiotic world), ethics which asserts “that all things have intrinsic worth – value in and of themselves – not just instrumental or utilitarian value” (Merchant, 1986, p. 215).

Biota have the right to exist and to continue to do so in future generations for their own sake, over and above their utilitarian ends dictated by needs that are external to them, one above all the maintenance of the health of the biosphere. None of these three forms of environmental ethics can escape criticism, and all are marked by unbridgeable

deficiencies:

Egocentric and homocentric ethics are often lumped together as anthropocentrism (by deep ecologists, for example). But this approach masks the role of economics and particularly of capitalism, placing the onus on human hubris and domination rather than the capitalist appropriation of both nature and labor. Moreover, it fails to recognize the positive aspects of the social-justice approach of homocentric ethics. On the other hand, the ecocentric approach of many environmentalists suggests the possibility of incorporating the intrinsic value of nature into an emancipatory green politics. (Ivi, p. 216)

It is in this dead end that Merchant sees in the partnership ethic of Earthcare a saving escape route. The concept of mutual, living interdependence already stands out from the name she assigns to this alternative form of relationship between the human and non-human community. And again, it is possible to identify a common thread and relevance to what, in the preamble of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, is identified as the goal to be achieved: “[E]stablishing a new and equitable *global partnership* through the creation of new levels of cooperation among States, key sectors of societies and people” (United Nations General Assembly, 1992, p. 1). One big difference, however, arises: whereas the global partnership declared by the United Nations does not seem to take into consideration anything other than the human sphere – albeit on a micro and macro, local and global and cross-sectoral level – the partnership Merchant speaks of is a pact sanctioned by a multifaceted and multi-species handshake “between people or kin in the same family or community, between men and women, between people, other organisms, and inorganic entities, or between specific places and the rest of the earth” (Merchant, 1986, p. 217). It is based on four principles⁵:

1. Equity between the human and nonhuman communities.
2. Moral consideration for humans and nonhuman nature.
3. Respect for cultural diversity and biodiversity.
4. Inclusion of women, minorities, and nonhuman nature in the code of ethical accountability. (Ibidem)

⁵ To the four principles that Merchant lays down as the basis of a sustainable partnership between a human and a nonhuman community in *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*, a fifth one is added in *The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*: “An ecologically sound management that is consistent with the continued health of both the human and the nonhuman communities” (Merchant, 2003, p. 239).

In an approach that follows the code of conduct of the earthcare ethic, human arrogance and presumption, together with the shameless progress, are appeased and, by taking pause to listen to what nature needs, blunted. Already with Carson, we realised the value and urgency of the message that the sounds – or silences – of nature can convey to us. We find ourselves once again stretching our ears and closing our eyes in an attempt to develop a new sense or the ability to reconnect with a more-than-human world whose voice is defined by Merchant as “tactile, sensual, auditory, odoriferous, and visual – a visceral understanding communicated through our hearts into our minds” (Merchant, 2003, p. 242). “Guided by a partnership ethic”, writes Merchant, “people would select technologies that sustained the natural environment by becoming co-workers and partners with nonhuman nature, not dominators over it.” (Merchant, 1996, p. 56).

Merchant uses the word “co-workers” as a call to active and real action, an encouragement to make tangible decisions and efforts today to rewrite history with an ending, or better to say a continuation, that is sustainable over time: “The new ending [...] will not come about if we simply read and reread the story into which we were born. The new story can be rewritten only through action” (Ibidem). And I imagine it was precisely this urge to take to the streets that drove the achievements of Mira and Sarala Behn, of Lois Marie Gibbs at Love Canal and the Three Mile Island protests, first in the form of a thought in the head and a quickened beat in the heart, then as a motto shouted in the squares, a demand for justice for trampled rights violations, from the ashes of which a new awareness is born: environmental issues and feminist issues women’s issues and environmental issues must be addressed in the same arena. The human and the more-than-human are recognised as complex systems for which the search for compromise must take into account new rules and different strategies than those used in the past. In adopting an ethics of partnership we rethink conventional history and begin to write a new narrative.

When the concept of partnership is taken up and explored in the more recent work by Merchant *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (2003), we witness the proposed rewriting of the dominant plot par excellence which is the Edenic Recovery Narrative:

The new story would not accept the patriarchal sequence of creation, but might instead emphasize simultaneous creation, cooperative male/female evolution, or an emergence out of chaos or the earth. It would not accept the idea of subduing the earth, or even dressing and keeping the garden,

since both entail total domestication and control by human beings. Instead each earthly place would be a home, a community, to be shared with other living and nonliving things. The needs of both humans and nonhumans would be dynamically balanced. (Merchant, 2003, p. 257)

Merchant invites the reader not only to detach from the dominant narrative that we have always been told by people of power (Merchant, 2003), but also to recognise it as one among stories, to actively challenge it and not succumb to it. As if we were characters locked in the middle of a voluminous tome, we try to lift the half-book that crushes us and prevents us from seeing the other books on the shelf and sneak out: what we discover, looking that book from another perspective, from a distance, is its relativism. Once again we find common ground with Plumwood and her opposition to the dualistic and hierarchical logic-based contrasts that Western culture is steeped in and that tend to make the concept of domination natural and that of subordination inevitable (Ruether, 1975). Now that our character is straddling between one book and another, is it possible to dive into a new narrative with a different plot? And if we decide to go back inside our voluminous and old book, would we be able to change the plot, consciously acting from within? The viewpoint of the dominant ideology of Modernity sees history as progressive and linear and nature as historically conceived as a gendered object (Merchant, 2003, p. 256), but since “[b]oth history and nature are extremely complex, complicated, and nonlinear” (Ibidem), the question posed by Merchant is the following: “What would a complex, nonlinear, regendered history with a different plot look like?” (Ibidem). To begin with, it would be a story with multiple narrators, therefore told in multiple voices: i.e., the actors – none of them as main characters – would be real people facing events that are not necessarily sequential or progressive and linear, but mostly random, and they would do so through dialectical and spontaneous actions and processes, which are not top-down imposed (Merchant, 2003). As Merchant concludes: “It would be a story of partnership (or a multiplicity of stories and partnerships) that perhaps can only be acted and lived, not written at all” (Ivi, p. 256).

2.3 A bottom-up perspective of subsistence

Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, ethnologist and sociologist, director of the Institute of the Theory and Praxis of Subsistence (ITPS) in Bielefeld, Germany, and honorary professor at the University for Soil Culture in Vienna, offers a further contribution to the ecofeminist

picture outlined so far by making a feminist analysis of capitalism. Similar to Merchant, hers is a search for an alternative narrative to the main narrative, and a cure to her own diagnosis of the dynamics of today's world: "[...] I know that from bitter experience. But that's what it's all about: questioning the unquestioned beliefs and looking for ways how things can be different nowadays, in the 20th and 21st century, in a very practical and pragmatic way" (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2011, p. 3). Indeed, she recognises the radical transformations taking place and the - environmental, economic, financial, food - crises by which our present is riddled and which converge into a major crisis of culture and values. In line with what was addressed in the first chapter on overshooting – population, natural resources, pollution, cementing – the limits, Bennholdt-Thomsen repudiates the Western capitalist drifts such as mass consumption and production, and disproportionate and profit-blinded growth that have punctuated the pace of the modern economic model based on progress without ifs and buts and unsatisfied human needs since the 19th century.

According to her thought, for instance, the obsessive accumulation of profit rests its basis and sinks its claws into individual advantage and well-being, or greed, which alienates human beings from collective well-being, consequently making them guilty not only of the ruthless destruction of humanity, but also of the degrading plundering of nature. Her invective also rails against globalisation, analysing the overwhelming results of its triumph. In continuity with what was already mentioned at the beginning of this work about the levelling and forced flattening of the world under the steamroller of the global free market, Bennholdt-Thomsen reiterates the adverse effects of globalisation: tensions are even more pronounced and contrasts become more strident. During the speech she gave in May 2011 at the *Perspektiven der Matriarchatspolitik* ("Perspectives on Matriarchal Politics") congress, she said:

In the name of the free world market, millions of farmers are deprived of their land – which means their livelihood – and everyone else of their seeds, and the debt for chemical seeds drives thousands to suicide. Refugees are turned away at the borders of better-off neighbours, thousands die in flight. Energy companies do not shy away from using nuclear technology that threatens all life, and governments make themselves their accomplices for the sake of supposed economic growth. The economy itself has become a war, money a weapon. The border to bloody warlike violence is fluid. [...] It is necessary to recognise that the worldview of the growth society follows the symbolic order of death. (p. 1)

As a consequence of this diagnosis, the cure that Bennholdt-Thomsen, together with

Maria Mies, suggests is a re-examination and re-establishment of values and a cultural reorientation, aimed at overcoming productivism and greed, hence the pursuit of an impossible fulfilment of what from needs become desires or, worse, addictions. Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies indeed address the issue of subsistence, eventually theorising a politics and economics of subsistence within which - contrary to what happens within a capitalistic system - the real needs of human beings, as they are naturally finite, are satisfied. In *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy* (1999), Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen explain that they arrive at this term, “subsistence”, because it encapsulates all the connotations expected from an alternative cultural and value orientation: “freedom, happiness, self-determination within the limits of necessity – not in some other world but here; furthermore persistence, stamina, willingness to resist, the view from below, a world of plenty” (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999, p. 19). Also, “[i]t expresses the historical connectedness that exists [...] between us in the industrial countries and the countries of the South” (Ibidem) in terms of modern development that first colonised the countries of the South and is now carrying its flag to those of the North.

Furthermore, the term subsistence takes on and expresses the contradictions and distortions of modernity, always expressing the viewpoint of the observer: if we interpret it from the point of view of the perpetrators of this colonisation, the term subsistence is synonymous with a loss-making reversion to backwardness and hardship. Its meaning changes if we take the perspective of the victims, for whom it means “security, the good life, freedom, autonomy, self-determination, preservation of the economic and ecological base, and cultural and biological diversity” (Ibidem).

A further, certainly positive interpretation attributed to the word subsistence is that of “attitude of independence”, by Erika Marke, who defines it through three main characteristics (Marke, 1986, p. 138): independence understood as autonomy, self-sufficiency and self-reliance, understood as having one’s own cultural identity. The subsistence orientation aims at the preservation of life and is therefore opposed to the production of added value or capital accumulation typical of a neo-liberal system: “Satiation, satisfaction and appreciation do not rest in the given and the living processes associated with it, but only beyond it. This is patriarchal. Subsistence politics, on the other hand, follows immanence. That is matriarchal. The meaning and the spirit lie in things, lie in this world, in this earth” (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 2011, p. 6).

The two authors argue how in a finite world driven by the neo-liberal politics of globalisation, the enrichment of one cannot happen except at the expense of another:

“[T]here cannot be progress of one part without regression of another part, there cannot be development of some without underdeveloping others. There cannot be wealth of some without impoverishing others” (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999, p. 29). And among the victims are those who look at the economic system of the twenty-first century from below: the perspective is that of women, children, nature and the most fragile and disadvantaged people, from the countries of the global south.

It is for this reason that, linking up with the first chapter of this thesis, I have chosen this as an element of this ecofeminist puzzle. This prevaricating and colonising violence is not, therefore, gender-neutral: the victims, or colonies, are mainly women and their role was as indispensable in the initial phase of capitalism – defined as the “period of primitive accumulation” (p. 30) – as it is today in the maintenance phase of the disproportionate growth dynamics of capital.

According to Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, indeed, this dynamic of bottom-up sustenance of the processes of domination works especially with regard to the patriarchal man-woman relationship, which pursues a logic of *housewifeisation*⁶ by upholding a sexist division of labour between housewives whose unpaid household and family care tasks are functional to reproduce the future generation of wage workers, and breadwinners, who sell their labour for a wage with which they support the family, thus playing a productive role. This division of male and female roles is part of the debate brought about by socialist feminism on productive and reproductive labour. The former – associated with the public sphere – is remunerated insofar as it produces goods or services to which the capitalist system recognises a monetary value; the latter – which involves activities such as child and household care – is associated with the private domestic sphere and is unpaid.

The more the global crises escalate, the more violence against women is exacerbated, which is why a strategy of mere gender equity and equal opportunities is not enough. Rather, a strategy that combats all forms of exploitation, subordination and domination is urgently needed, as they are intrinsically linked to and underpin the global capitalist patriarchal system. A bottom-up subsistence policy and economy – conscious of its responsibilities and shaped by an interweaving with nature – offer the perspective, intended as a new way of looking at the world and its stories, for the liberation of women and nature that we need today.

⁶ Mies, during her research for the work *The Lacemakers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* (1982), coins the term “housewifeisation” to indicate “not only the wageless reproduction of labour power but also the cheapest kind of production work, mainly done by women in homeworking or similar work relations” (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999, p. 34).

3. Multiple visions of the self

Civilised Man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is Other—outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for. I am that I am, and the rest is women and wilderness, to be used as I see fit. (Le Guin, 1989, p. 161)

It has become clear at this point that the interdependence and connection, and not the juxtaposition or instrumentalisation, between human and non-human, man and woman and nature and culture is the key that ecofeminism uses to give us access to a redefinition of human being. Or rather, of being, in relation to others. Not only that, the concept of interrelationship is also the common ground that bonds what can by no means be defined as a homogeneous set of thoughts, but rather a “plurality of positions” (Warren, 1994, p. 2).

Where these multiple positions converge is in the idea of relationality. Indeed, rationality harmonises ecofeminist discourses on the self and it is the characteristic that ecofeminism loudly attributes to it.

The self is, on ecofeminist accounts, a relational being: In its identity, character, interests, and preferences, [the self] is constituted by, and in the course of, relationships to particular others, including the networks of relationships that locate it as a member of certain communities or social groups. [...] Relationships to others are intrinsic to identity, preferences, and so on, and the self can only reason as the social being she is. (Friedman, 1991, pp. 164-165)

Also Chris J. Cuomo, Professor of Philosophy and Women’s Studies at the University of Georgia, agrees by stating that the human being lives – and needs to live – a continuous process of formation and shaping in confrontation and interaction with other people (Cuomo, 1998). Indeed, we have already noted how, within the ecofeminist strand, the other, from being a passive object or static puppet moved by the strings – and for the mere amusement – of the human puppeteer, becomes an active, attentive, dynamic, speaking subject.

The model of relationship and interdependence thus dissolves that web of domination and submission and leaves room for relationships of care, reciprocity of needs, friendship and respect. From a feminist point of view, it is not the progressive distancing or the

increasingly sharp definition of boundaries that generate knowledge. On the contrary, knowledge arises where there is recognition of connectedness and mutuality (Keller, 1985). So, the network of interconnections in which we move and weave like a spider with its web fulfils our needs for sociality and relationship with the other:

The human self is “embedded” in a network of relationships with others, both at very immediate and intimate and at wider levels. Human needs and interests arise in a context of relationships with other people, and human needs for relationships with other people cannot be understood as merely instrumental to isolable individual ends. (Grimshaw, 1986, p. 175)

Plumwood, in order to explain these essential relationships driven by an almost primitive instinct aimed at the well-being of the other, uses the metaphor and image of the mother with her child. The mother, desiring the healing of her sick child, aligns her personal well-being with that of her child. The desire for healing is pure and an end in itself, not a vile means to another end. Plumwood warns us: do not believe that this kind of relationship is only found among relatives or close friends: “Such intrinsic or essential relationships are not confined to the private sphere, and the sense of loss and despair brought about in most of us by the future prospect of a devastated natural and social environment cannot be explained in terms of isolable individual interests” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 154).

Within this chapter I will attempt to explore the ecofeminist view of the relational self, based, as the definition itself suggests, on the recognition of relationality and on the rejection of the dualistic and oppositional perspective. I will pursue this analysis by reviewing different types of visions of the self.

On the one hand, I will introduce the concept of relational self that, from the perspective of an ecofeminist ethics, can structure a different way of moving and acting in the world, and thus of approaching – and reformulating a response to – the problems of the contemporary world mentioned in the previous chapters and of which specific examples will be offered in the following one, in which oppression – and not cooperation – between living forms is the mainstay.

On the other, I will present the points of view of Gaard herself and Plumwood. Gaard considers the autonomous self the nemesis of relationality, whereas Plumwood perceives it as a subject that is constrained as much by selfishness as by rationality.

It is precisely on this last characteristic that I will pause, with a reference to Cuomo’s concept of hyper-rationality. The picture will be indicative of a self which is reflected in the

deep ecology's transpersonal self, as the result of the egoistic drifts of the individualism of the dominant Western culture, which phagocytises and obliterates any being that is identified as other than itself.

3.1 Being in contraposition to others: the master identity

I would like to start with the latter – what the ecofeminist self is not – in an approach to the ecofeminist self which goes by opposites, although opposites are not. Indeed, it is necessary to specify that ecofeminist voices outlining the relational self – though fully expressing their dissatisfaction with a separative self – are often careful not to create further dichotomous and dualistic visions that would undermine the very concept of the relational self. As mentioned before, different voices construct a different identikit of the nemesis of the relational self. In this attempt to sketch such a portrait, Plumwood draws the first one. The strokes that spring from her pen immediately create a clear image: for her, it is a “rational individualistic subject of social and economic life” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 141).

As has been said before, there are several voices rising up against this kind of identity. According to Grimshaw, “it is right to reject an individualistic account of the human self, if by that is meant that the doctrines of abstract individualism or psychological egoism, or the notion that the interests of each human being are sharply separable from those of other people, are untenable” (Grimshaw, 1986, p. 175). Plumwood traces the origins of selfhood back to the advent of Modern capitalism. Indeed, from that moment on, the history of the human-nature relationship changes forever. That, according to Plumwood, is the watershed that marks the entry into the era of systems of individual appropriation and distribution that are based on an individualistic conception of both the person and rationality and on the rejection of the other. Economic and liberal theories unleash a new rationality that casts everything that can be considered non-human into a corner, trampling it underfoot, but not only: even the reproductive sphere and physical corporeity, as well as the work of those who have seen the flag of the colonising master planted on them, have been pushed aside.

Along with all this comes the most unrestrained and shameless instrumentalism that can exist, the faithful companion of selfishness, capable of reducing non-human nature to an instrument, only to reach self-interest and double purpose. By instrumentalism with regard to nature, Plumwood means “the kind of use of an earth other which treats it as

entirely a means to another's ends, as one whose being creates no limits on use and which can be entirely shaped to ends not its own" (Ivi, p. 142).

Indeed, at the antipodes of the ecofeminist self is the dualism between self and other, which from the one side, is interested in nature or the other insofar as it can gain personal advantage from it for achieving its own human ends; from the other side, it feeds on selfhood "conceived as that of the individual who stands apart from an alien other and denies his own relationship to and dependency on this other" (Ibidem). Needless to say, the only fruit that can be harvested from such rational market-driven selfishness are forms of exclusion, division, extractivism and discrimination/subordination of all those who are deemed to be inferior because they fail to meet the standards dictated by the Western civilised rationality.

Another term that Plumwood's pen sketches firmly in the creation of the self as a result of the dominant Western culture is "hyperseparation" (Ivi, p. 146), or "radical exclusion". Hyperseparation exists when there are high walls, impassable borders, deep moats, checkpoints with guns and barbed wire between the means and the ends. These clear boundaries instill security, from a certain point of view, as they eliminate the threat of ambiguity. The perpetrators do not run the risk of becoming victims if they stay well sheltered beyond that dualistic wall between means and ends. And masters do not find themselves among slaves if they assume the power perspective of instrumentalism. A hyperseparate conception of the self is an individualistic conception in that it assumes self-sufficiency and denies interdependence, to the detriment of the relationship with the other. Indeed, the latter is only an alien recognised instrumentally, as a means to achieve one's own ends. The radical exclusion marked by the boundaries of hyperseparation treats the other not only as different, but as inferior. Hyperseparation is one of the five key indicators that alert us to the fact that we are dealing with a dualism, understood, according to Plumwood, as

a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalised in culture and characterised by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders constructed as systematically higher and lower, as inferior and superior, as ruler and ruled, which treats the division as part of the natures of beings construed not merely as different but as belonging to radically different orders or kinds, and hence as not open to change. (Ivi, pp. 47-48)

Among the other characteristics which Plumwood ascribes to dualisms, and that are useful for drawing an even more definite profile of a separative self, are *backgrounding*

and *denial*: a complex characteristic which, on the one hand, leads the master to benefit from what the other can offer, on the other hand, denying the relationship of dependence that is being triggered, thus considering the other as a mere background mechanism, a kind of slave from which to draw the necessary energy to be considered master and, at the same time, an indistinct figure belonging to the blurred second plane of a photograph. But it is clear: without the boundaries, without the slave and his or her supposed otherness, the master's identity cannot become such, as it is totally mirrored and dependent on such boundaries: "it is the slave who makes the master a master, the colonised who makes the coloniser, the periphery which makes the centre" (Ivi, p. 49). These observations, it must be noted, ultimately derive from the Hegelian lord-bondsman dialectic, and more directly, through Karl Marx and the concept of class struggle, are an obvious continuation of Frantz Fanon's theoretical reflections on decolonization, included in his pioneering study, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).

By *incorporation* or *relational definition* Plumwood considers the way in which virtues associated with only one side of the dualism are assumed to be principal, more important than others, thereby defining the inferiority of the other side, which lacks such qualities. This is a mechanism whereby the devaluation of one side is totally based on quality standards arbitrarily decided by the other side. Inclusion or rapprochement of the two sides is thus impossible, difference is not tolerated. The only possible end to this power dynamic is the exclusion of the part which is not recognised as conforming: "The other is recognised only to the extent that it is assimilated to the self, or incorporated into the self and its systems of desires and needs: only as colonised by the self. The master consciousness cannot tolerate unassimilated otherness" (Ivi, p. 52).

The last two features appearing on Plumwood's list – the ones that, according to her, generate the descriptive framework of dualistic relationships – are presented as corollaries of radical exclusion and incorporation: *instrumentalism* and *homogenisation*. Instrumentalism, or objectification, refers back to the relationship between means and ends mentioned earlier: the interests of those on the disadvantaged side of the dualistic dynamic are set aside and used at the mere whim of the other – upper – side of dualism, as stepping stones to reach, then impose, its personal ends and needs: "The identity of the underside is constructed instrumentally, and the canons of virtue for a good wife, a good colonised, or a good worker are written in terms of usefulness to the centre" (Ivi, p. 53). Homogenisation, or stereotyping, allow the dominating part to look at the disadvantaged counterpart as a homogeneous amalgam, conforming in itself, devoid of

any typical connotation that could in any way provide a face, a name or dignity.

To the master, all the rest are just that: 'the rest', the Others, the background to his achievements and the resources for his needs. Diversity and multiplicity which are surplus to his desires need not be acknowledged. The other is [...] related to as a universal rather than a particular, as a member of a class of interchangeable items which can be used as resources to satisfy the master's needs. Elimination of reliance on any particular individual of the relevant kind also facilitates denial of dependency and backgrounding. (Ivi, p. 54)

Rationality is a key feature on which the ecofeminist discussion of the self is hurled. Cuomo, in her work *Feminism and Ecological Communities* introduces the term "hyper-rationality" (Cuomo, 1998, p. 96) to denote the typical characteristic of the individualistic cognition of human beings that makes them isolated and separated from any kind of environmental influence. She then goes on to theorise a "rational, utility-maximizing, atomistic human self" finding a similarity between those individual, selfish selves and atoms, as "self-sufficient and self-contained" (Ibidem).

Again, we are dealing with a dualism which is enemy of the non-human and that puts reason before the world of the emotions and thought in place of the body. In a never-ending withdrawal from any form of sociality or exchange and interaction, hyper-rationality influences and has the last say in decision-making with respect to "what counts morally" (Ibidem). Indeed, in this way, according to Cuomo, ethical choices can only be made on the basis of reason and rationality, neglecting the part played by emotion, compassion and feelings of responsibility in ethical action.

It is worth pointing out that Cuomo distinguishes between hyper-rationality and rationality. Against the former she hurls her criticism, while not completely rejecting the role the latter can play within ethical decision-making, as long as it does not remain the sole decision-making criterion: "Though we need not deny the value of human rationality and reason, the glorification of a hyper-rational self is inconsistent with an environmental philosophy that aims to demote rationality from its position as the basis for ethical value, and to recognize the value of nonrational entities" (Ivi, p. 100).

The rigid hyper-rationality and binary judgment at the core of Western way of thinking translate into a mentality of domination and exploitation. Based on oppression and control, androcentric patriarchy requires in its turn the exploitation of women, abuse of the environment, militarism, technocracy, and consumerism, all of which factors are inextricably linked. To counteract this, the ecofeminist theory sheds light on – and begins

with – what is seen as the major link between the many and varied types of violence against women and the contempt with which humans treat the earth: “Ecofeminists believe that we cannot end the exploitation of nature without ending human oppression, and vice versa” (Gaard, 1993, p. 19). Being informed by ecology as well as feminism, Ecofeminism, in fact, embraces the belief that the oppression of the environment and the oppression of women within patriarchal societies must be broken on both sides.

This theoretical aspect is interconnected also with Greta Gaard’s conceptualization of Posthuman Ecofeminism. Philosophers such as Gaard have argued that what we need is “a rethinking of the human seen as a rational, cultural and historical, male subject, and the nonhuman relegated to an inferior place” (Yazgünoğlu, in Vakoch, 2022, p. 365). Furthermore, “injustices based on gender, race, class, and species” (Ibidem) are the direct cause of a colonial-capitalist system, which Posthuman Ecofeminism aims to deconstruct and challenge.

Gaard ascribes an autonomous self to the master identity, which arises and is nurtured already at an early age, in the childhood of the human being, closely linked to the culture in which he or she grows up. Indeed, children who grow up as part of a Western culture will develop a sociality and a self strongly shaped and influenced by their gender. While on the one hand girls are socialised to a greater continuity and relationality of their self and identity with regard to that of their mothers, on the other hand the self-identity of boys grows influenced by the perceived difference and sense of separation from their mothers. This latter sense of the self based on difference is defined by Gaard as “autonomous” (Gaard, 1997, p. 14).

According to Gaard, the process whereby the autonomous self erases and denies identities can be traced back to deep ecology. The term “deep ecology” was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in his article *The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement. A summary* (1973). It refers to a specific philosophy – nay, “*ecosophy*” (Naess, 1973, p. 99) – and worldview which are characterised by the continuous questioning of human life, society and nature. This concept denotes an awareness that recognises the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena, and the fact that human beings, both individual and social ones, depend on and affect nature’s processes.

In his article, Naess defined the characteristics of the deep ecology movement as opposed to reformist ecological thinking or “shallow ecology” (Ivi, p. 95). Shallow ecology is defined as the movement that fights “against pollution and resource depletion” (Ibidem), whose central focus is on the “health and affluence of people in the developed countries”

(Ibidem). Conversely, deep ecology is distinguished by a reversal of approach. Its basic – and normative – principles are set out by Naess in seven points, advocating – among other things – the inherent value of all human and nonhuman life on Earth, the importance of diversity and of symbiosis, a theory based on “complexity” rather than “complication” (Ivi, p. 97), and, in general, a “[r]ejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image” (Ivi, p. 95).

Plumwood considers deep ecologists not capable of providing a viable alternative to the individualist and rational self, and therefore criticises deep ecologism “as [it] continues to suffer from problems associated with unresolved human/nature dualism and other dualisms” (Plumwood, 1997, p. 173). Although Plumwood admits that deep ecology strives to emphasise the concept of continuity between human beings and nature, strong tensions remain between some forms of deep ecology and ecofeminist thought. While ecofeminist thought assesses continuity with the other as fundamental to overcoming the concept of dualism as the recognition and affirmation of the other’s differences, on the other hand “[m]ajor forms of deep ecology have tended to focus exclusively on identification, interconnectedness, sameness and the overcoming of separation, treating nature as a dimension of self” (Ivi, p. 174).

Indeed, the tendency of deep ecology to identify the main problem of the human-nature relationship in the separation between the two spheres leads it to answer with the total identification of the self with nature. In this way deep ecology develops a propensity to incorporate and homogenise, which erases all the differences. Deep ecologists seem to move between at least three different declinations and features of the self – transpersonality, indistinguishability and expansion – which Plumwood considers all to be failures, both from a feminist perspective and as per an environmental philosophy.

First, according to Plumwood, the “transpersonal” definition that deep ecologists ascribe to the self risks perpetuating a dualistic and dominant way of conceiving nature: it is a self-viewed and an isolated subject that incorporates, absorbs and internalises any external objects in nature, thereby levelling out any differences and assimilating them to the self, which is thus reinforced. Secondly, even if the indistinguishability of the deep ecological self rejects the hyperseparation and radical exclusion between human-nature through the destruction of those high and artificial embankments that nail nature to the riverbed, keeping it well separated from human beings, on the other hand, this impetuous overflowing of the river leads to such a rise in the waters that it is no longer possible to distinguish the outlines of the houses inadvertently built next to the watercourse.

Everything – indistinguishably – goes underwater in a “unifying process, a metaphysics which insists that everything is really part of, indistinguishable from, everything else” (Ivi, p. 177).

Plumwood clearly recognises the hand of the master consciousness in this erasure of differences. It is a form of subordination and colonisation that does not take into account the other’s differences, features and needs. Thirdly, regarding the expansion of the self and in response to the Norwegian philosopher – and father of deep ecology – Arne Naess, according to whom “[t]he self is as comprehensive as the totality of our identifications... Our Self is that with which we identify” (Naess, 1985, p. 261), Plumwood’s argument is to perpetuate a form of “arrogance in failing to respect boundaries and to acknowledge difference which can amount to an imposition of self” (Plumwood, 1997, p. 179). The deep ecology self, indeed, is accused of being egotistical since “[i]t continues to subscribe to two of the main tenets of the egoist framework—that human nature is egoistic and that the alternative to egoism is self-sacrifice” (Ivi, p. 180).

First Warren in *Ecofeminist Philosophy and Deep Ecology* (1999), and then, following in her footsteps, Diehm in Naess, Val Plumwood, and *Deep Ecological Subjectivity: A Contribution to the Deep Ecology-Ecofeminism Debate* (2002), gave Naess the opportunity not only to respond to Plumwood’s accusations, but also tried to demonstrate that Naess’s position could, in some way, be reconciled with that of ecofeminism. Indeed, Naess sees the transpersonal characteristic of the self as a process of exponential expansion of connections in which “higher level unity is experienced: from identifying with one’s nearest, higher level unities are created through circles of friends, local communities, tribes, compatriots, races, humanity, life, and, ultimately [...] unity with the supreme whole [...]” (Naess, 1993, p. 30). Furthermore, although his closeness to Gestalt ontology might suggest otherwise, both Warren (1999) and Diehm (2002) point out Naess’ aversion to approaches that deny differences and nullify the distinctiveness of the individual. Indeed, Naess’s use of Gestalt principles expresses a view of individuals as certainly distinguishable, and at the same time characterised by a distinct and necessary relationality that enables them to survive and regenerate: individuals “remain separate. They do not dissolve like individual drops in the ocean” (Naess, 1989, p. 195). And this would bring Naess very close to the ecofeminist vision of the self based on a type of ethics that allows and values both the continuity of ties with nature as well as differences which I will elaborate on in the next paragraph. In other words, the ecological, relational, ecofeminist self that develops through and feeds on a dense web of relationships.

3.2 Being in relation to others: the ecofeminist ecological self

Gaard takes up Plumwood's critique of the master and Western identity, and thus of the dualistic structure it feeds on and benefits from, to elaborate the concept of human alienation from nature:

From an ecofeminist perspective, the "human alienation" from nature and from wilderness may be experienced in one way by those who have created, chosen, perpetuated, or in some manner continue to benefit from the alienation and in quite a different way by those whose alienation from nature is not a chosen condition, but a matter of force. (Ivi, p. 7)

There is therefore a contradiction – which, according to ecofeminism, is *the* contradiction on which the foundations of cultures of oppression rest and develop – since, on the one hand, "the devalued Other is alienated from nature" (Ibidem), and, on the other, it "is simultaneously seen as closer to nature in the dualisms and ideology of Western culture" (Ibidem). It is in this direction that the efforts of ecofeminist theorists such as Plumwood, Cuomo, Gaard, and Warren are headed in their attempt to replace the hyper-rational, hyperseparated as well as individualistic selfhood identity with a self identity capable of nurturing and sustaining, as well as recognising, the relationships with the other. This is the main characteristic of the ecofeminist ecological self: relationality and interconnectedness with nature.

Ecofeminist ethics holds that all forms of life are closely interrelated and there is no clear-cut disjunction between the self and the other. Plumwood's definition of relational self in *Nature, Self and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy and the Critique of Rationalism* (1991) is significant in bringing out its central aspects:

It is an account that avoids atomism but that enables a recognition of interdependence and relationship without falling into the problems of indistinguishability, that acknowledges both continuity and difference, and that breaks the culturally posed false dichotomy of egoism and altruism of interests; it bypasses both masculine "separation" and traditional feminine "merger" accounts of the self. It can also provide an appropriate foundation for an ethic of connectedness and caring of others . . . On this relational account, respect for the other results neither from the containment of self nor from a transcendence of self, but is an expression of self in relationship, not egoistic self as merged with other but self as embedded in a network of essential relationships

with distinct others. (Plumwood, 1991, p. 20)

Plumwood argues that the human being, immersed in a “network of essential relationships with distinct others” (Ibidem) is constantly under the influence of the other. The other is made up of all the relationships we experience on a daily basis, be they other human beings, or non-human beings. In this way, identity undergoes a continuous process of co-creation, like a clay pot moulded now by hands, now by paws, and never finally baked.

Far from being something optional, this continuous reshaping of the relationship of interdependence with the other in place of the atomistic conception of clear separation from other living forms is defined as something necessary by Cuomo in *Feminism and Ecological Communities: An Ethic of Flourishing* (1998): “[H]uman individuals necessarily shape and are shaped through our interactions with other persons, and within communities and groups” (Cuomo, 1998, p. 97). Cuomo’s definition of ethics also echoes the concept of shaping each other, with a caveat that in itself contains all the meaning behind the conflict between individual choices and moral issues: if choices are made in the wake of an individualist model of selfhood and self-interest, then these are likely to result in often non-positive consequences for the interests of others. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the implications of our choices on seemingly unrelated elements and contexts if we want to have a positive impact on them. This implies a responsibility that should accompany the choices made daily in the awareness that they have repercussions on the lives of others. Indeed, the intrinsic relationality of the concept of self-identity, Warren writes, is capable of challenging and disproving the notion that moral subjects are independent in their range of action and influence both in relation to other moral subjects and from the point of view of the historical, social and material context (Warren, 2000).

In her definition of relational self, Plumwood also addresses the problem of indistinguishability on the one hand and hyperseparation on the other. The relational self keeps away from these extremes: it is not a blending that makes one lose all traces of identity by smoothing out all differences; at the same time, it is something that is mutually nourishing and does not erect walls of clear separation from the other. The reciprocity of the relationship, indeed, consists in the recognition of a similarity with the other – the concept of not being “alien” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 156) to each other – and at the same time in the awareness of one’s own difference with regard to the other and of the other’s difference with respect to the self. As a matter of fact, the reciprocity mechanism that fuels

this form of self is not only compatible with the existence of others, but is based on – and would not exist in the absence of – existence with others. Only in this way is the “combination of resonance and difference” (Benjamin, 1988, p. 26) made possible. And it is precisely this continuous tension between similarity and awareness of diversity that makes contact with nature so powerful. As Plumwood puts it in a metaphor involving her and a snake:

I see the snake by the pool about the same time as it sees me. We are both watching the frogs, but with different aims. There are not nearly so many froglets as yesterday, and I wonder if the snake managed to eat them all or whether they just dispersed overnight. There are so many mysteries here. We are used to one another, and have a shared basis of understanding and expectation, but one which does not entirely exclude the unexpected. The snake does not retreat; neither do I; but we are aware of one another as significant others. Our interaction involves shared expectations (and hence recognition of the other as alike in being a centre of needs and striving), but also recognition of difference: recognition of the other as a limit on the self and as an independent centre of resistance and opacity. (Plumwood, 1993, p. 157)

Gaard and Cuomo also criticise the suppression of differences in the conception of the relationship between the self and the other. The former, in *Ecofeminism and Wilderness* (1997), first of all points out where the ecofeminist view diverges most from the feminist self. It is the anthropocentrism that ecofeminists have a duty to undermine from the very definition of self. It is anthropocentrism that ecofeminists are duty-bound to first acknowledge, then unhinge from the very definition of self. Indeed, according to the ecofeminist ecological self, human identity is not only shaped by the relationship with other human beings, but also with non-human elements. Then, Gaard states that the identity model of the ecofeminist ecological self is the only one capable of recognising “the life-affirming connection between humans and nature while still preserving the distinct identities of each” (Ibidem). Cuomo, in *Feminism and Ecological Communities: An Ethic of Flourishing* (1998), perceives – and warns of – the meaninglessness, as well as the danger, involved in equating the moral values of “any sentient or self-conscious being” (Cuomo, 1998, p. 102) to those of “human persons” (Ibidem): as an example “between a child and a rat, between an endangered manatee and a fisherman, between a domesticated, beloved dog and an endangered wolf, and between a wild pig and a pig on a farm” (Ibidem).

Gaard’s definition of the ecofeminist ecological self also incorporates the concept of the

human being seen as a natural being, besides being a social and a cultural being. Indeed, although the cause-effect relationship between humans and nature appears to the eyes of many to be a one-way street in terms of the influence that the part that builds, demolishes, extracts, knocks down has on the part that instead bends, changes shape, becomes almost unrecognisable under the concrete pours, this is not truly the case. Although Western culture struggles to recognise it, nature too, in its own way, shapes human identity. In a few words, as Cuomo puts it, human selves are “necessarily and significantly participating in/as nature as well as human social reality” (Cuomo, 1998, p. 100). By this concept, Gaard affirms that in the rejection that the human being is also influenced and permeated by nature, just as nature suffers human impact, a dichotomous and hierarchical conception between nature/culture and human/animal emerges once again, from which ecofeminism must eschew. Human beings must in fact be reconsidered in the full round, which means taking into account not only the cultural and social dimensions of which they most obviously form part and which permeate them, but also in the light of their interconnection with the natural world.

Recognition of the fact that different dimensions collaborate and cohabit in a full self identity can lead to a substantial change in the way human beings interface with the natural. In relation to this, Cuomo sees, among the possible implications, “an attitude of humility as well as recognition of human ignorance concerning biotic interdependencies and long-range consequences” (Ibidem). Humans, being dislodged from the pedestal of anthropocentrism, can no longer assume that their interests are paramount, thereby in their relationship with the other they abandon the instrumentalism-based approach to embrace modes of relationship based on respect, benevolence, care, friendship and solidarity. Therefore, the ecofeminist ecological self includes among its primary aims “the goal of the flourishing of earth others and the earth community” (Plumwood, 1993, pp. 154-155) “and hence respects or cares for these others for their own sake” (Ivi, p. 155). As Cuomo writes:

[...] [E]cological feminists have in mind a sort of extension of the ethical universe, though the expansions they have in mind are not merely a matter of extending traditional or hegemonic ethical norms and principles to new kids on the “ethically significant” block (such as women, tribal peoples, or sentient beings). Instead, they emphasize how extension to include anyone but straight white landowning men into the ethical universe entails radical revisions of subjects, objects, communities, and value. (Cuomo, 1998, p. 110)

It is necessary, therefore, to move away from the patriarchal ideology, based, as we have seen, on the separation of the self from the other and the hierarchical divisions that follow. Indeed, in the separation of the self from the other, the self is dominant and the other is subservient, and as the separation of the self increases, so do phenomena that are both corrosive of human relationships and also aggravating of environmental crises, such as divergences, forms of discrimination and oppression.

Furthermore, certain lines of Western thought have traditionally posited that human beings are superior to, and separate from, the natural world. This is a fundamentally patriarchal idea, too, which stems back at least to 17th-century Baconian-Cartesian philosophy, and seems to constitute the core motive behind the overexploitation of the environment. For ecofeminists, the deterioration of the environment and the oppression of women are related aspects, and must be theoretically deconstructed in order to improve not only human-nature relationships, but also to tackle and eventually remove gender asymmetries.

In waging these battles on the front of both philosophical-academic argumentation and social-political activism, Ecofeminism fuses together different currents of thought, from Hegel and Marx to Vandana Shiva. It also encapsulates the fruit of centuries-old struggles fought in the name of inclusion and egalitarian principles, each one of them advocated in different moments in history and evolving from diverse contexts.

Indeed, according to the ecofeminist theory, in an intersectional perspective on which many ecofeminists draw, all the forms of domination – such as “naturism⁷” (Warren, 1990, p. 132), classism, racism, speciesism – are interconnected, therefore it will never be possible to achieve true women’s liberation until the other oppressed entities are also finally free. Women, non-binary people, as well as the poor or working classes and non-human animals, are part of this, falling victim to the worst repercussions in both environmental and social terms.

In *Ecofeminism. Women, Animals, Nature* (1993) Gaard writes that “[i]nstead of being a single-issue movement, ecofeminism rests on the notion that the liberation of all oppressed groups must be addressed simultaneously. It is for this reason that I see coalition-building strategies as critical to our success” (Gaard, 1993, p. 5). The connection between the oppression of women and other subaltern subjects and the oppression of nature is the reason why feminist thought is concerned with, and connected to, environmental issues, and is the reason behind Gaard’s invitation to “challenge both the

⁷ Warren defines naturism as the “domination and oppression of nonhuman nature” (Warren, 1990, p.132)

ideological assumptions and the hierarchical structures of power and domination that together serve to hold the majority of earth's inhabitants in thrall to the privileged minority" (Ivi, p. 10). Woman, emotion, body and nature, are concepts that have historically been devalued compared to what were considered opposites such as man, reason and culture.

Consider, for example, the case of Seveso. In the fourth chapter, I will go into detail about how the female reproductive system as well as the woman herself were the main victims not only of a production system sickened by capitalism that led to the explosion of the dioxin cloud, but also of a conception of both a social and legislative system that did not recognise the self-determination of women. At the same time, this interconnection between the suffering of nature and that of women leads the latter to set themselves up as paladins of environmental justice, the meaning of which will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

We will see, in this case, the commitment of Laura Conti on behalf of the Seveso community, in particular of women and their right to abortion; or of the women protagonists in the case of Casale Monferrato, whose voice succeeded in reconstructing an identity for the place and the community that was more lasting than the effect of the asbestos that had crept into their bodies, their husbands, brothers, sons and fathers. The latter are examples of how an approach to the relational, ecological and diverse model of self is desirable not only to help break down the dualisms and hierarchies typical of master identity, but also to redefine and redecline human actions and behaviour in an ethical and respectful perspective, in accordance with a conception of the world that goes beyond anthropocentrism.

4. Talking bodies of Environmental Justice

I wonder what a country is like where all the children have hare faces. Maybe hares have a child's face. (Conti, 1978, p. 76)

It has been recounted how environmental costs and risks are far from equally divided between rich and poor, North and South, social groups. Just as the causes that trigger environmental disasters are often blamed on a global minority that extracts, produces, consumes, throws (repeating endlessly) on the shoulders of Others. The Others, i.e. those who, by tossing the coin of class, race and gender got the cross, pay a surcharge. Penance consists in being more exposed to the negative consequences of environmental abuse, contamination and pollution. Far from the romantic idea of nature, the environmental justice movement does not fight to safeguard the biodiversity of pristine oases or *loci amoeni*, places literally “without walls”. Places of concern for environmental justice do have walls. The walls are often the domestic ones, perhaps covered in 1970s wallpaper. Or those of the workplace, of the steel mill with its frame made of reinforced concrete and asbestos.

Nature becomes a “space of everyday life” (Armiero, 2013, p.22): it is contaminated by the human being as much as the human being is contaminated by nature. From this perspective, the concept of the ecofeminist ecological self can be taken up, declining it: an identity that, relating and constructing itself in a process of continuous becoming with the context in which it lives, is strongly influenced by it. In environmental justice, the corporeality of the human being is overexposed and symptomatic. Indeed, it is the litmus test – often used as evidence in lengthy trials – of the causal relationship between human activity, environmental exposure and disease. A relationship that, although not immediately demonstrable, certainly exists.

Like ecofeminist thinking, environmental justice represents a fork in the road of the more classical and traditional environmental culture, an awareness-raising with consequent brake on the axiom “greater economic growth = greater well-being for all”. The knowledge at the heart of environmental justice is not delegated. Knowledge, even scientific knowledge, is not satisfied with the hearsay and cannot rely on intermediaries. “We speak for ourselves”, one of the most representative slogans of the American environmental justice movement, claims exactly this right: we – and no one else – speak about our problems. The movement embraces a bottom-up approach and is field-built through

observation and direct experience, gathering enough evidence to challenge traditionally understood scientific knowledge and strenuously defend its positions within the walls of the courts. Furthermore, there is a willingness, as well as a need, to speak and tell a story and a point of view that are far from those of the majority because “Narrating means counter-narrating, because environmental injustice is not only imposed with armoured vehicles and truncheons, but also with a narrative that eradicates any possible alternative, that imposes an official truth, that criminalises those who oppose it” (Armiero, 2014, p. 16). Also narrating is a form of resistance. This determination not to be represented by anyone but oneself combined with the urge to give voice to cases of environmental injustice merge and meet perfectly in the material dimension of the bodily testimony.

Sick bodies, but also contaminated territories, as well as natural elements and toxic agents are bearers of stories revealing the different planes – discursive and material – that merge into a single reality. At the same time, they are both witnesses and irrefutable proof of the inextricable link between the human and the natural, as well as of the dysfunctional relationship that the cultural has established with the natural. They question the myth of the separation of human and non-human that, confident in itself, embraced the realms of causes as much as consequences, without ever bringing them together. The porosity of which Nancy Tuana speaks in *Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Hurricane Katrina* is the key to explaining that there is “no sharp ontological divide” between “social practices and natural phenomena,” but rather “a complex interaction of phenomena” (Tuana, 2008, p. 193). This concept is also reiterated by Laura Conti when, observing the social and cultural dynamics that have, like the material ones, shaped and moulded the ecological relationships in Seveso, she writes:

I was beginning to realise that “environment” is not only the combination of water, air and earth; that one cannot consider human beings in their relationship with nature if one does not also consider them in their relationship with other human beings, and in their relationship with the objects they make or the plants they cultivate. Considering the “sevesini” made no sense if one did not also consider the vegetable gardens behind the houses and the araucaria in front of the houses [...]. (Conti, 1977, p. 85)

According to Tuana there are, indeed, membranes whose nature may be social as well as biological or political that mediate the interactions between us and the world:

[...] a viscous porosity of flesh—my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge

through which we are of and in the world. I refer to it as viscous for there are membranes that effect [sic] the interactions. These membranes are of various types—skin and flesh, prejudgments and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments. (Ivi, p. 199-200)

Thus, the contamination and pollution of the environment goes hand in hand with human contamination and illness: air pollution caused by the incineration of plastic not only invades the body of those who breathe it, but also triggers a process of progressive body alteration: “Components of the bottle have an agency that transforms the naturally occurring flesh of my body into a different material structure than what occurs in nature” (Ivi, p. 202). Bodies are themselves “[...] a field of intersection of material forces and symbolic forces [...]” (Braidotti, 2009, p. 243), but also a field of a paradoxical battle. Bodies, indeed, tell the threat that humans armed with radioactive waste, dangerous chemicals, plastic, waste of all kinds and electromagnetic waves pose to both themselves and the environment.

Here it is also worth mentioning the concept of *Alterlife* proposed in *Making Kin Not Population* (2018) by Michelle Murphy. The concept of *Alterlife* emerges whenever addressing the harmful effects produced by those industrial chemicals that, without respite, “continue spreading ubiquitously across the earth, transforming the epigenomes, neurobiology and metabolism of living beings, human, non-human and more than human” (Murphy, 2018, p. 113). Murphy gives an insightful interpretation of this bodily invasion pollutant when she talks about the high concentration of lead and mercury in Canadian indigenous territories such as the Grassy Narrows and the Aamjiwnaang First Nations considering it as “a persistent form of colonial violence, an interruption to Indigenous sovereignty and the relations that make up land and life” (Ibidem). In this sense, it is possible to consider Seveso and Casale Monferrato, as well as other small suburban towns on which large multinationals plant their polluting flag, as areas whose bodies and lands have been conquered, exploited and drained and then, exhausted, abandoned to themselves in an agonising state. The concept of *Alterlife* juxtaposes both that of the slowness characteristic of the environmental violence explored in the case of Casale Monferrato since it “is forged in recognition of the long duration of densified everyday environmental violence” (Ivi, p. 116); and that of environmental justice in terms of certain territories, communities or individuals who are more exposed to environmental injustice than others: “*Alterlife* [...] is extensive, now planet wide, even as it is unevenly concentrated in some places and bodies” (Ibidem).

Indeed, polluted bodies also act as spies of social inequalities. Vulnerability is in the crosshairs of environmental injustice and the right to health is the first one to be compromised. A dioxin-poisoned body is, in all likelihood, the body of a working-class person, the body of the wife who washes her blue-collar husband's clothes, the body of the non-human species, of those who lived in physical and social conditions that exposed them to greater risk:

Political failures to address the environmental hazards of plastics have left their signature on the flesh of many bodies, but the bodies of industry workers who toil in the plastics factories or the garbage incinerators and the bodies of those who live in the path of their pollutants have disproportionately suffered the negative effects of this material-semiotic interaction. (Tuana, 2008, p. 203)

Along with Tuana's concept of porosity, the notion of transcorporeality brought about by Alaimo will also run through the cases. Alaimo who, like Tuana, is a neomaterialist feminist thinker, does not consider the separation of the carnal and material being from the environment in which it is located to be possible, as this subject – the one who knows – is traversed by the substances of the world and is never separated from the world it strives to know (Alaimo, 2016). In *Trans-Corporeal Feminism and the Ethical Space of Nature*, Alaimo considers the trans-body dimension as “space-time in which human corporeality, in its carnal and material being, is inseparable from nature and environment” (Alaimo, 2008, p. 238). The dimension she describes is made up of bodies, human and non-human, understood as porous, open systems, traversed and cohabited by the substances of the world, whose material effects influence them. The result of this continuous interpenetration of bodies, agents and effects is the blurring of any kind of boundary or demarcation line, between natural and artificial. In the face of environmental disasters, any line of demarcation is blurred, as is the supposed autonomy of human bodies.

Neomaterialist feminism leads towards Barad's concept of nature, that is nature being rethought through what she calls “intra-actions” between material and discursive, human and more than human, phenomena. According to Barad – whose thinking will also be taken up within the narrative of the Seveso case – matter and meaning are interdependent in the “ongoing performance of the world” (Barad, 2007, p. 149): “Matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder. [...] matter and meaning cannot be dis- sociated, not by chemical processing, or centrifuge, or nuclear blast. Mattering is simultaneously a matter

of substance and significance" (Ivi, p. 3). Human and non-human intermingle horizontally. An example of this is the uncontrolled pollution that mixes with – and disrupts – both the lives of inhabitants and natural ecosystems, and the material effects that arise from that. Human and environmental health blur in a process that Serenella Iovino describes as a

combination of different agents, each with its own concrete, effective, corporeity: the increase in cancerous diseases in people and animals, the contamination of the sea, rivers and aquifers, spontaneous abortions, biodiversity at risk, the disappearance of landscapes, new or old issues of failed citizenship and inadequate socio-environmental policies. (Iovino, 2017, p. 192)

In the two cases of environmental justice that I will propose in this chapter – that of Seveso and Casale Monferrato – on the one hand, this invasive reciprocity will be evident in places where the environment is modified by human beings, and in turn it alters them; on the other hand, the asymmetrical structures of power and domination that deliberately choose the main – expendable – victims of environmental injustice will clearly emerge. In this sense, the victim's condition is potentially multiplied ad infinitum:

- Multiplied by 1: victim of environmental disaster;
- Multiplied by 2: victim of social inequalities and injustices;
- Multiplied by ∞ : victim of intersectional discrimination.

After all, as Stacy Alaimo reminds us in *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*,

[f]or feminists, LGBTQ people, people of color, persons with disabilities, and others, thinking through how corporeal processes, desires, orientations, and harms are in accordance with or divergent from social categories, norms, and discourses is a necessary epistemological and political process. For some people this is a matter of survival. (Alaimo, 2016, p. 184)

An intersectional ecofeminist approach, indeed, provides a perspective that breaks down divisions between gender, race, class and approaches and interrogates a multitude of ecojustice issues such as

[g]lobal gender justice; climate justice; sustainable agriculture; healthy and affordable housing; universal and reliable health care, particularly maternal and infant health care; safe, reliable, and

free or low-cost reproductive technologies; food security; sexual self-determination; energy justice; interspecies justice; ecological, diverse, and inclusive educational curricula; religious freedom from fundamentalisms; indigenous rights; the production and disposal of hazardous wastes; and more. (Gaard, 2011, p. 52)

Furthermore, the centrality of the role of women in the struggle to achieve – and resist by narrating – environmental justice will emerge. On the one hand, Laura Conti's prompt intervention on the tragic scene of Seveso gives voice to a community that has collapsed under the weight of the stigma of contamination and takes a stand for those women on whom the effects of dioxin had the greatest impact. On the other hand, Romana Blasotti Pavesi and the other women of Casale Monferrato set in motion a slow process of mourning, a demand for justice, and resistance and narration – through which they achieve the reappropriation – of community identity.

4.1 Seveso: a dioxin-told story

Before 10 July 1976, the only time 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin, or TCDD, had come into contact with humans was between 1961 and 1971, during the Vietnam War. From a substance innocuously associated with the production of herbicides, during the war it gained the code name Agent Orange. The US Army used 75,000,000 litres of it to raze the forests of South Vietnam that so well concealed Vietnamese combatants. Chemically, what distinguished Agent Orange from Agents Blue, White, Pink and Purple – other military defoliants used by the same army in the same war – was its main toxic pollutant component: dioxin. Today, that substance is infamously known as Seveso dioxin. Seveso is considered the first eco-catastrophe of the industrial era in Italy (Bevilacqua, 2006). Although the catastrophic consequences of dioxin at an ecological level – even in the long term – on biodiversity, groundwater pollution, soil impoverishment and erosion are undoubted, the social consequences are no less serious: from the impoverishment of agricultural production and fishing to the serious illnesses with which people exposed to dioxin – then their children, then their grandchildren – are forced to live. Eventually – although the cause-effect relationship is not similarly logical and mathematical – dioxin also brings to the surface political dynamics, gender hierarchies and discriminatory patterns.

In the municipality of Meda, on the border with Seveso, some 15 km north of Milan, ICMESA S.p.A. (Industrie Chimiche Meda Società) – owned by Givaudan S.A. of Geneva,

which in turn was acquired by the Hoffman Roche Group in 1963 – was engaged in the production of pharmaceutical and cosmetic intermediates. On 10 July 1976, the A 101 reactor in section B of the plant released a dense, acrid-smelling dioxin cloud into the atmosphere.

I was there on the terrace that day. It was 12.15 or 12.30. There was this smell. It hadn't rained for days. There was a drought. It was rumoured in the village, either due to ignorance or... so... as a joke, that there were planes trying to cause rain. I used to work down in the bar, with my dad. Ordinary people who came to the bar said: "Did you smell that?" They said: "It must be those disinfectants they are throwing in to make it rain". (Interview with a newspaper-seller woman, resident in Seveso, quoted in Centemeri, 2006, p. 13)

The cause was an abnormal overpressure caused by an exothermic reaction in the trichlorophenol tank. The emission lasted for hours. Moreover, despite the period suggesting a torrid, sultry summer day, it was windy (Cementer, 2006). The cloud covered an area of 1810 hectares, and the municipalities most affected by the pollution – but not the only ones – were those of Seveso, Meda, Desio and Cesano Maderno (Ramondetta and Repposi, 1998). A few days after the accident, the areas affected by the cloud were divided into A, B and R according to the area's soil contamination. From the invisibility of the substance to the tragic visibility of the dioxin's effects: the following day, 11 July, the lifeless bodies of chickens, rabbits, hens, cats and dogs began to appear in the courtyards of houses; on 15 July, redness and swelling appeared on the skin of the people, both children and adults, who had been most exposed to dioxin (Ferrara, 1977). These first effects were so immediate and manifest, touching the daily life of the community so closely, that they represented for the inhabitants of the community the first clue and means of information – before any official communication – on the seriousness of what happened:

We knew nothing of what happened. The dead animals, yes, we saw them in the garden. The sparrows... Like... the cat, no, the cat a little later on, when we already knew... As they warned us, the first thing was to get the son away... Then there was a lot of fuss. For example, we had chickens and they came to pick them up... it was a bit chaotic, the way they warned us about it. (Interview with a housewife resident in Seveso, quoted in Centemeri, 2006, p. 34).

The more than 700 inhabitants of zone A – where dioxin in the soil exceeded 50 µg/m² – were evacuated. This measure was not deemed necessary for zones B and R where

dioxin levels in the soil did not exceed 5 µg and 2 µg per square metre respectively (Ramondetta and Reposi, 1998). The latter were subject to other bans, such as not hunting for the coming eight years, abstaining from procreation, and not cultivating and/or consuming agricultural and livestock products. In addition, children under the age of 12 and pregnant women were ordered to leave during the day and then come back at night. Suddenly, in front of the wide-open eyes of Italy, Europe and the entire world, the ills of industrialisation were all visible in that handkerchief of Brianza land. That axiom linking industrialisation to progress and progress to well-being crumbled in the face of the tragedy that the population of Seveso was experiencing on its skin. Science, politics and law were questioned with respect to their interdependencies, brought to light precisely by dioxin. Pregnant women who came into contact with dioxin stood exactly at the crossroads of this triangle: the consequences were also affecting their gestation, putting the foetus at risk of serious malformations.

In those years, in Italy, feminist movements in the streets were clamouring for the right to self-determination, that is, full decision-making power, from the first to the last word, over a woman's own life and body (Marchetti et al., 2012). Beyond the mere decriminalisation of abortion, what they demanded was full possession of the woman's own reproductive capacity (Murgia et al., 2016). Until 1975, anyone who induced an abortion, as well as the woman herself, risked imprisonment for two to five years. On 18 February of that year, the Constitutional Court declared partially illegitimate Article 546 *Abortion of a Consenting Woman* of the Criminal Code because it conflicted with the second paragraph of Article 31 and the first paragraph of Article 32 of the Constitution, which reciprocally protected maternity, childhood and individual and collective health. The law makes a further step forward in prioritising women's health over that of the foetus. The Seveso episode – although at a very high cost – brings this partial success closer to Law 194/1978 on the social protection of maternity and the termination of pregnancy, which today still regulates the voluntary termination of pregnancy in Italy.

Going back to the areas and people affected by dioxin, on 9 August 1976 the specially established regional medical-epidemiological commission assessed that the effects of dioxin could increase malformations in the foetus and ruled that contaminated women were entitled to a therapeutic abortion, but only because “the idea of giving birth to something monstrous could endanger the woman's psychological health” (Romagnoli and Turi, 2021, p. 32). If on the one hand the Popular Scientific Committee founded by Seveso citizens and Icmesa workers, made up of chemists, ecologists, and democratic doctors

supported the right to abortion, on the other hand the local expressions of the Catholic world – strongly rooted in that provincial context – expressed their indignation and dissent by ferociously attacking those who called for that right. At the centre: the women of Seveso, reduced to disputed bodies, passive witnesses to the more subtle – the ones not immediately visible – effects of dioxin and silent protagonists of a public debate that ignored their self-determination and tugged them to one side and the other. This tug-of-war of the woman's body between contrasting positions is well represented by the environment of the Seveso family counseling centre recalled by the testimonies collected by Ferrara (1977):

I'll give you an example straight away: women who went to the counselling centre were faced with the feminist or other radicals who posed the issue of abortion as something lightweight [...]. And you would also find the Catholic [...] from Comunione e Liberazione telling you: watch out, you are killing your child. In other words, a series of things happened that confronted women with fundamental contradictions [...]. (Interview with a 21 year old woman trade unionist from Seregno in Ferrara, 1977, p. 129)

[...] it should be pointed out that those women who decided to carry on with the pregnancy certainly did not do so light-heartedly: throughout the gestation period they expressed a desperate hope that the birth would come to a happy ending . It [was] not the usual worry of all pregnant women, but an additional worry after what happened. (interview with the secretary of the family counselling centre in Seveso, Ivi, p. 146)

That year Laura Conti was a regional councillor for the Communist Party and would become, within a few years, co-founder of Legambiente, together with Giorgio Nebbia. Born in 1921, with a partisan past behind her, she experienced fascist prisons during the war. She later became a doctor, but also a political activist and a passionate fighter of social and ecological battles that she carried on until her death in 1993. A unique figure in the history of Italian environmentalism, Conti was also a convinced anti-nuclearist, one of the promoters of the referendum in 1987 that decreed the decommissioning of nuclear power plants in Italy. Not only that: her writings, characterised by an interweaving of material and discursive elements, played a prominent role in testifying to a disaster that was expanding on different levels and dimensions, being the result of the interpenetration of material elements and social constructs. In Seveso, Conti was on the front line, alongside the population, particularly the women, both to inform the community and to

denounce the way in which the tragedy of the women of Brianza was being handled. On 7 August, Prime Minister Andreotti gave his consent to the use of therapeutic abortion. Although this was an important concession, Conti did not shy away from condemning the hypocrisy of those who did not speak out against so-called spontaneous abortions, i.e. abortions that were not wanted not by the mother, but by others – such as Givaudan – and which, because of dioxin, were occurring in ever-increasing numbers:

There was a doctor who made a woman who had asked for an abortion listen with a phonendoscope to the pulsations of her embryo's heart. However, it was not technically possible to record the slow fading of the pulsations of embryos that had died “spontaneously”, in order to send the magnetic tapes to Givaudan's shareholders. (Conti, 1978, pp. 105-106)

Conti also criticised the grounds on which women were allowed to have abortions: therapeutic abortions were only recognised and authorised if the woman declared that a *monstrous* birth risked driving her mad. In this way, the debate, as well as the accusation and the stigma, moved away from Icmesa and dioxin and shifted to the pregnant women, who were guilty of failing to take responsibility for the malformation: “the debate ignores self-determination, but also reveals the bioethical contradiction of this very law which, while it does not allow the woman to abort if the child she will give birth to is sick, allows it instead if the thought of giving birth to a monster risks driving the mother mad”. (Ivi, p. 75).

Although Conti's stance represented an important step in the fight for the right to abortion, it did not meet with the full approval of the population and women of Seveso. The latter, manipulated and overburdened, were moving between two fires: on the one hand, the health risks produced by dioxin, and on the other, the risk of losing their identity by going against their values. Conti writes that the community perceived the stimuli coming from outside as a threat to its deepest values. For this reason, the Seveso community reacted to contamination with a certain irrationality and inconsistency. Driven by the need to survive both physically from the disease and socially within the unwritten laws of the community, they legitimised and became ambassadors of the social stigma until it affected their own bodies: “the same people who were avoiding the contaminated people were in turn angry at being shunned as suspects of contamination” (Conti, 1978, p. 10). Actually, the figure of Laura Conti was perceived as controversial in that provincial and deeply Catholic and conservative context. The illusion that was being generated was twofold: on the one hand, Conti was deluding herself that she could help a population of women who, on the contrary, did not support her positions; on the other hand, the community itself –

also influenced by an “irresponsible campaign of downplaying carried out by Christian Democrat scientists” (Ibidem) – was deluding itself that it could forget what happened. Conti had to come up against a wall of denial erected by a community consumed and bent by the shame of having fallen victim to that tragedy. Indeed, the people of Seveso, in order to escape the forbidden and scandalous idea that abortion represented, even denied the toxicity of dioxin. Conti remembers that: “They denied everything. They denied that there was dioxin. They denied that dioxin came out of the Icmesa reactor. They denied that dioxin was toxic. They pushed their denial [...] to the point of contesting the need for remediation or safeguards” (Ivi, p 9.). Women's self-determination represented a greater risk than dioxin intoxication, and raging against abortion only diverted attention away from the real health problems and recovery possibilities of the affected community. Women's bodies and unborn bodies became the object of confrontation as well as being transformed into town squares, meeting places where public attention was more and more morbidly expressed and questioned with respect to the need for remediation.

Here too Conti's words stand out significantly and directly: “[...]Provoking abortions to produce and sell trichlorophenol was considered legitimate, provoking abortions to meet women's desire not to produce unhappy children was considered horribly sinful” (Conti, 1977, p. 34). Icmesa had already uprooted and transformed the Seveso identity, turning them, in the eyes of the whole world, into victims of misfortune and giving them a sinister reputation. Abortion would have constituted a further distancing from their roots as a disavowal of the values of the Christian community. The construction of a common narrative that could recount the damage done to bodies and the environment was impossible where values and self-identity were at stake (Centemeri, 2006). The 35 or so women of Seveso who availed themselves of the choice of abortion condemned their history, the history of their bodies and that of the environment to oblivion. Those whose origins were far from those places now regarded only as plague-ridden and purulent, decided to leave Brianza and return to their places of origin – mainly Veneto and Southern Italy. So, although the consequences of this environmental disaster are, to some extent, equally distributed on the heads of all, rich and poor, workers and entrepreneurs, men and women, the lens of environmental injustice and intersectional discrimination offers a key to understanding that – the risks were – and the damage was greater for women. In particular, as it turns out, for pregnant women. This climax of fear and worry, which in affecting the pregnant woman increases in level, is clearly visible in the testimony of a woman who discovered that she was expecting a baby ten days after the outbreak of the

toxic cloud: “At the moment I was afraid, but we didn’t know what it actually was. But when they started saying not to eat the food and those other things then the fear grew. And then when I knew I was pregnant, then I was really terrified” (interview with a woman from Reggio Calabria who worked in a cotton mill and lived in Meda in ferrara, 1977, p. 148). Indeed, the dioxin compound was just yet another layer of discrimination that had settled over the heads of the women of Seveso, who were already hunched under the weight of gender discrimination, making them more exposed. As explained above, exacerbating an already dramatic situation was a time and a context in which sex education did not exist, the use of contraceptives – although theoretically permitted since 1971 – was still strongly hindered, abortion was considered illegal except for serious health reasons, the National Health Service (established in 1978) had not yet been created, and divorce had just been confirmed after a referendum in 1974. A time and a legislative, social and cultural framework that, therefore, prevented women from full self-determination and control over their own reproductive capacity, thus making them vulnerable protagonists of the tragic debate to which the disaster gave rise:

They did not understand that the woman was the most severely hit, that she was the one who had to decide, that she was also the most handicapped in making her decisions and needed solidarity for the abortion, which was not there precisely because of these clashes that brought about an element of deep division. (Interview with a citizen of Seveso, *Ibid*, p. 89)

Moreover, to further worsen the situation, there was the social stigma inflicted by a society that Conti defines as “sexophobic” (Conti, 1978, p. 11), strongly Catholic and closed towards the outside world, according to which giving birth to a malformed foetus was more tolerable than an abortion. I report below two testimonies collected by Ferrara that, once again, significantly contribute to shaping the portrait of the Seveso woman of those times, as well as the community in which she lived.

The women of Seveso had always been very close-minded. [...] Whatever might happen outside didn't matter. We had to look at our girls, our area, our morals: a girl in Seveso had to behave in a certain way otherwise the town would condemn her and one single word was enough to ruin a house. The girls, if they are good, go to church [...] They did not need the “abortion counselling centre” [...] because the women of Seveso do not have abortions. (Interview with a girl born in Seveso with southern origins in Ferrara, 1977, pp. 56-57)

Here, in my opinion, they do not think for themselves. They look a lot at the most prominent people in the town. In the assemblies, when a person from a certain class speaks, they don't pay attention to what he or she says, they listen because he or she is "important". That is how they have been used to it, under parochial rule. (Interview with a citizen of Seveso, Ivi, p. 89)

In her novel, Conti recounts the tragic story of Assuntina who, exposed to dioxin when she was already in her fifth month of pregnancy, found no one, neither in Switzerland nor in Sicily, willing to help her have an abortion. On the run from the carabinieri and her mother, she was found senseless in front of the doors of the hospital in Messina: "since no one helped her, she had shoved a knitting needle into her belly to kill that baby with a hare's face" (Conti, 1978, p. 101). Further highlighting the power dynamics by which she was crushed, people's comments: "[S]he had evidently been abandoned by the man and had been afraid of dishonour" (Ibidem). A further definition that Conti attributes to the Seveso society is that of "honest people who expect honesty from others" (Ferrara, 1977, p. 212), who in a certain sense delegate responsibility to the people in whom they place their trust, the latter, on the contrary, exclude the population from the cost-benefit calculation: "The idea of society arranging abortion would have been accepted if they had seen society moving heaven and earth to get rid of dioxin. Then they would have said: well, many things are done, abortion is among them. Instead there was nothing else done, there was only abortion" (Ivi, p. 210). If, on the one hand, women were under the influence of that society, on the other, women from the Veneto and the south also suffered the discrimination that the locals reserved for immigrants: the disaster had sharpened that distinction between the "we" and the "you" often staged by Conti in his novel. The estrangement following the decision to interrupt the pregnancy and the return to their places of origin became both a symptom and a consequence of the unstable relationship with this society that was as individualistic as it was stormed by "disturbing communitarianisms" (Centemeri, 2019, p. 4), headed by the Catholic movement *Comunione e Liberazione*.

Even in the years that followed, the issue of abortion in Seveso was treated as a social stigma. The priority was to forget and return to life as usual, to the normality of before. The Seveso community, in doing so, buried the only weapon of resistance it had: the collective and public memory of the place and a history whose elements of social marginality, industrial interests, institutional inertia, inadequacy of the law and moral dilemmas somehow reinforced social control and gender hierarchies (Iovino, 2017).

Conti's narration of this event brings out the trans-corporeal dimension of a reality in

which the tear left by the passage of invisible toxic agents showed the existence – stimulating comprehension – of a community and its bodily, value and political history, which was also torn apart. In this sense, the reference is to the ecocriticism of matter and the theory of “agential realism” formulated by the American theoretical physicist and feminist philosopher Karen Barad. According to the ecocriticism of matter, the matter is “a corporeal palimpsest endowed with its own immediate narrative power” (Iovino, 2017, p. 199). Thus, the interweaving of material and discursive elements is interpreted in its socio-evolutionary dynamics: women's bodies, in this case, are matter and the environment is the result of the combination and interpenetration and crossing of human activities, non-human activities and material substances that relate to each other, influencing and determining each other.

This being in relationship reflects the concept of intra-action and the theory of agential realism formulated by Barad, according to which “Matter is [...] not to be understood as a property of things but, like discursive practices, must be understood in more dynamic and productive terms-in terms of intra-activity” (Barad, 2007, p. 150). In other words, matter is anything but static or inert, but it is an active agent and should be understood as a substance in its intra-active becoming: a constantly being in its process of materialisation. The neologism intra-action was coined by Barad to mean “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (Ivi, p. 33). If the concept of interaction envisages pre-existing entities that subsequently interact, that of intra-action means that entities emerge and come into being precisely and only through this reciprocal activity.

And so, as mentioned above, the two dimensions of the Seveso disaster, the material and the discursive, determine and influence each other in a dance that sees the co-participation of a multiplicity of actors, both natural and social, bodies, value and political identities. This twofold level – material and discursive – appears clearly within Conti's narrative when, expressing herself with respect to the abortion diatribe, there is a continuous cross-reference and connection between the risks of foetal malformation and the possibility of legitimising abortion, in other words, from the level of the material consequences of the toxin to the political and ideological level. Dioxin, in this sense, acts first of all as a trans-corporeal agent of disaster, whose poisonous wake – in its “chain process of intoxication” (Iovino, 2017, p. 201) – succeeds in affecting not only the present, but also the future of the forms of life it invades; then, dioxin serves as a revealing agent (Ibidem) of the multiple stratifications of reality. Indeed, in its guise as a chemical and toxic substance – acting and interfering with bodies and territory – it lays bare both social and

political constructs of Seveso's reality (Ibidem), hence the ideological and discriminatory practices enacted on women's bodies.

Beyond any individualism or ideological opposition, at the end of the day, what remains under people's shoes is poisoned earth. Beyond the subjectivity of place and the collective consciousness of the inhabitants, the priority which reminds us once again that it is not only human bodies that are sick, is environmental remediation. Remediation – the only way to break the vicious circle of human and non-human poisoning – is understood by Conti as “an act of hope, but above all as an act of will” (Conti, 1977, p. 88). A few months after the Seveso accident, it was a courageous request for a meticulous analysis of the ground, for the removal of both vegetation and soil when the disturbing doubt was still spreading among the population, above any kind of individualism or parochialism, competition, or ideological opposition: “What will the dioxin do under these torrents of water? Will it deepen into the ground? Will it go down to the water table?” (Ivi, p. 90). An International Commission decided on the scarification of area A to a depth of 40 cm, as well as the creation of two special dump-tanks (A and B) in which the earthy material, the rubble of demolished buildings – including what remained from the demolition of the Icmesa plant – and the equipment used for the reclamation operations themselves would be placed. Tank A is located in the municipality of Seveso, tank B in the municipality of Meda. In total, 280,000 m³ of contaminated material was stored (Ramondetta and Repossi, 1998). In the A area, following scarification work, the transfer of approximately 15-20 cm of soil material from areas at least 10 km from the accident, planting and replanting, the Bosco delle Querce (Oak Wood) was created. Although the wooded area – now home to 6,000 specimens of various tree species, 22,000 undergrowths and 18,500 shrubs – is intended to symbolise a rediscovered balance between human and non-human in the arduous attempt to leave behind – and inside tanks – what had happened, various anthropic soil revitalisation and organic fertilisation interventions were needed to restore the fertility of the land, which had been rendered practically deserted by the first reclamation works.

In this filtering through the various socio-political, ideological and soil strata and substrata, Seveso's dioxin also brings out the limits of Italian environmentalism, broadening its interest and field of action. Indeed, if up until the 1970s the risks of industrial production were deemed to fall exclusively on the workers⁸, in the 1980s concern

⁸ A telling example of this is the atypical form of protest staged in Porto Marghera by the militants of the New Left of Potere Operaio in 1973: the crucifixion of the worker. Following the ordinance forcing them to wear gas masks throughout working hours, they protested by shouting “Mask to the chimneys, not to the workers!” crucifying a

extended and embraced the entire community in the awareness that workers, citizens and the environment shared the same health risks and burden. The environment is now understood and perceived as a responsibility on a global scale: there is no alternative but to share it. Thus, the discourse on Seveso dioxin rises to the level of European legislation. The gravity and resonance of the disaster were such that it changed the horizon of industrial culture not only from an ecological point of view, but also from a legislative perspective and not only in Italy, but also in Europe. Having highlighted the inadequacy of what was, at the time, the legislation on industrial risk for workers, the environment and the population, the Seveso disaster triggered the formulation – on 24 June 1982 – of Directive 82/501/EEC, commonly referred to as the “Seveso Directive”⁹, which provided for a system of accident prevention through adequate control of industrial plants considered to be at greatest risk to the environment and the neighbouring population (Ramondetta and Repossi, 1998).

4.2 Casale Monferrato: a place identity surviving asbestos

That of Casale Monferrato is a success story, albeit paid dearly and slow in coming. Slowness is also the characteristic that Rob Nixon attributes to environmental violence:

[...] a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. [...] a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. (Nixon, 2011, p. 2).

The slowness that characterises this case of environmental violence inevitably introduces the concept of latency. Latency blurs the temporal boundaries of asbestos exposure and makes – almost –unpredictable the timeframe of realising having fallen victim to asbestos. Sound-absorbing, heat-insulating, inexpensive, easy to manufacture, and resistant to temperature changes and corrosive chemicals, asbestos was, from the industrial revolution onwards, used on a large scale and in many sectors: in construction,

dummy wearing a gas mask and parading it through the streets. In that case the “poor christ” represented the worker, considered to be the only victim of the gas leaks.

⁹ On 9 December 1996, the new European Directive 96/82/EC, known as the “Seveso 2 Directive”, was approved in order to make the control system outlined in the previous version of the directive even more effective, later replaced by a third version, Directive 2012/18/EU (Ramondetta and Repossi, 1998).

shipbuilding and shipbuilding, the electrical, chemical, aeronautical, automotive, railway and textile industries. This, starting with the so-called economic and industrial miracle, took place especially in Italy, which until the 1990s was one of the world's largest producers of asbestos and the first in Europe. As an example of the widespread use of asbestos in Italy, it is estimated that around 40% of buildings constructed between 1967 and 1975 contain asbestos (Volpedo and Leporati, 1997).

Although as early as 1924 in *The British Medical Journal* the results of the first medical research on asbestos-related diseases recognised asbestosis as one of the diseases to which workers were exposed, Italy only officially included asbestosis among occupational diseases in 1943. Indeed, it was only between the early 1960s and the mid-1970s that international scientific studies unequivocally recognised asbestos as a carcinogenic substance, confirming the most atrocious of all news: there is a cause-effect relationship between exposure to the substance and the occurrence of tumours, especially pleural mesothelioma. To make matters worse, mesothelioma has a very high latency period of 40 to 50 years (Ziglioli, 2017). Therefore, considering that in the second half of the 1970s the extraction, production and consumption of asbestos reached its peak and that it was only with Law No. 257 of 27 March 1992 that Italy banned all products containing asbestos, prohibiting its extraction, import, export, marketing and production, it becomes clear that the boom of the 1970s reaped its Italian victims precisely in these years.

Once again, as in the case of Seveso, it became painfully evident that the collateral effects did not fall exclusively on the shoulders of those who had direct contact with asbestos dust and fibres on a daily basis through their work, but – especially in the cities that housed the mining sites and production plants – the contamination ran throughout the entire urban network: “[Mesothelioma] hits without order, a blow here and a blow there, it has spread the field, it takes those who have worked with asbestos and those who have never touched it but who, by some inscrutable ill fate, have inhaled its evil fibre” (Testimony of Daniela Degiovanni in Mossano, 2010, p. 125). The largest asbestos mine in Europe – and one of the largest in the world – is located in Balangero, in the province of Turin. In 1941, Primo Levi found his first job right inside that quarry, as a chemist in charge of analysing samples of serpentine rock and testing the possibilities of nickel extraction. This is how he describes the asbestos mine, as well as the precarious conditions of the workers inside it, in *The Periodic System* published in 1975:

On a squat, bleak hill, all jagged rocks and stumps, was sunk a cyclopean, cone-shaped gorge, an

artificial crater, four hundred meters in diameter: it was in every way similar to the schematic representations of Hell in the synoptic tables of Dante's Divine Comedy. [...] The operation proceeded in the midst of an apocalyptic uproar, a cloud of dust which could be seen down on the plain. The material was crushed again until it became gravel, then dried out and sifted; and it wasn't difficult to figure out that the final purpose of that gigantic labor was to extract a miserable 2 percent of asbestos which was trapped in those rocks. (Levi, 1984, pp. 67-68)

The Balangero asbestos plant supplied the largest production site for fibre cement – a compound made of cement and asbestos used in the building industry – from which the company takes its name: Eternit. Lasting forever. The Eternit company belonged to the Swiss Eternit Group and its products were used in construction as roofing material or as pipe insulation. Casale Monferrato was chosen as the location for the factory for strategic reasons: it was one of the main cement hubs in Italy, it also had plenty of water and the existing railway station would have facilitated transport operations. Opened in 1906 under the control of the Eternit Pietra Artificiale company with its registered office in Genoa, the plant was expanded in 1932 (Ziglioli, 2017). The definitive closure of the factory only took place in 1986.

On 28 February 1954, Italo Calvino publishes in the Turin edition of the newspaper *l'Unità* a story-report on the Balangero quarry entitled “La Fabbrica nella Montagna”, where he notes the loss of all the natural features of what used to be a mountain and anticipates the risks that asbestos dust causes, both to the natural environment and to human health: “[...] there are no hares in the woods, no mushrooms grow in the red earth of the chestnut husks, no wheat grows in the hard fields of the surrounding villages, there is only the grey dust of asbestos from the quarry that burns, leaves and lungs where it arrives, there is the quarry, the only one like it in Europe, their life and their death” (Calvino, 1954). Calvino's words as early as the mid-1950s sharply frame the relationship between the asbestos plant, the Eternit factory and the community of Casale Monferrato: the asbestos plant and the factory attracted labour, gave work, in this way distributing wealth, life. In exchange: the health of the entire community, the threat of death. But the gratitude of the workers and the entire community silenced the risks of asbestos exposure despite the fact that several cases of cancer had already emerged.

The blackmail continued until the mid-1970s, when some workers and trade unionists decided to break the chains of the “monetisation of risk”: a convoluted system of pay increases for those who worked in direct contact with the raw material. The young worker Nicola Pondrano supported by the then secretary of the Chamber of Labour Bruno Pesce

took a stand and began the battle against the working conditions and the health effects on both the workers and the entire community to free the community from what Ponderano calls Eternit's "deadly embrace" (Ponderano in Iocca, 2011, p. 16), made up of blinding benefits such as "the seaside holiday camp, the Befana for the children, olive oil twice a year, superminimes, the food shop, work shifts calibrated to favour even double activities [...], salaries with surcharges for uncomfortable or dusty workers" (Ibidem). The information and awareness-raising activities came out of the factory and involved the entire Monferrato community, whose awareness hovered between the alarming frequency of mesothelioma cases and the difficulty in accepting a reality that was too overwhelming and that would have disrupted the community identity so inextricably entwined with – and shaped by – that factory. In 1988 the Associazione Familiari Lavoratori Eternit Defunti (AFLED) was created – then named Associazione Familiari Vittime Amianto (AFEVA) in 2020 – to bring citizens even closer to the criticality of reality, narrating it and waking them up from that dangerous spell. Below are Ponderano's words recounting the birth and nature of the association:

Back then we thought of setting up an association... We tried playing around with acronyms and eventually this one came out, that of Afled. We asked Romana Blasotti to take on the presidency. [...]. She didn't want to at first, but then she accepted. [...]. Thanks to that container, we were able to talk to more people. It was a way to speak to the city even more effectively. The workers already had a clear reference: they spoke to the unions, the vast majority to the CGIL. The association became a ploy to give representation to the environmental, to family members, to those who did not identify with the CGIL. (Oral testimony of Nicola Ponderano, Casale Monferrato 25 March 2015 in Ziglioli, 2018, p. 57)

Who better than Romana Blasotti Pavesi could fully represent the spirit and goals of the association? Born in 1929 in Salona d'Isonzo, near Gorizia – now Slovenia – at the age of 18, following the annexation of Yugoslavia, Romana was forced to leave her homeland. She then moves to Casale Monferrato. Already in her youth, her family history encountered the Eternit Group: her parents worked in one of the Group's factories. In 1948 she married Mario Pavesi, and in 1955 he too finally became a worker in that factory: 'We were hoping for a job at Eternit, but it wasn't like that, there was a queue to get in' (Testimony of Romana Blasotti Pavesi in Mossano, 2010, p. 102). Romana's relationship with the Swiss multinational, in short, represented that of all those for whom the factory offered hope, a source of livelihood and fertile ground for starting a family. Serenity and

thankfulness. The development of this relationship has tragic results: asbestos kills first her husband, then her sister, a niece and finally a daughter. And even in this dramatic course of her life, Romana's story unfortunately continues to reflect the story of so many. Romana embodies the feeling of the survivors, almost a sense of guilt, representing at the same time “the wife, the mother, the sister, the daughter of all the Eternit workers, of all the victims' relatives, of all the potential future victims, in short of the whole city” (Ziglioli, 2018, p. 58).

How many times have I asked myself: why my daughter and my husband? Why my sister and my nephew? Who can answer me? It's true that in Casale Monferrato [...] we're all at risk [...]. But why didn't anything happen to me? I've been through exactly the same things. In fact, I think I've had more chances to be infected than my family members who are no longer with us, having washed the overalls my husband used to bring home for years. (Testimony of Romana Blasotti in Iocca, 2011, p. 86)

Five years after the death of her husband Mario Pavesi, Romana took over the presidency of the association, embodying not only the dramatic feeling shared by the relatives of the Eternit victims, but also the anger, energy and overwhelming desire for justice that has always characterised the association's activities: “I will never tire of saying this, even if it is my last breath: more must be done so that research can provide an answer of hope, of healing. It is not out of pity that I ask this, but for justice. Yes, it is for justice” (Testimony of Romana Blasotti Pavesi in Mossano, 2010, p. 106). Not only the public elects Romana as an emblem of the tragedy of Casale: her commitment against this “sick” (Bullian 2008, p. 218) production model is also awarded at the highest institutional level with the appointment in 2014 as Commendatore of the Republic (Ziglioli, 2018).

Hers is not the only female voice to take part in the slow as well as unstoppable and constant work of processing and transforming mourning into justice: the voices of teachers, doctors, journalists, volunteers, family members of victims, victims themselves, also join the affirmation of the identity of the place. The female citizen narrative of asbestos gathers, breaks down both family and communal boundaries. By bringing together personal stories and testimonies, collective memory is reconstructed, preserved, made explicit. In this context, the female narration of memory goes far beyond family history and calls for survival: it does not conceal what happened and does not resort to censorship, as is the case of Seveso. Thanks to the women's work, the tragedy is integrated within a community and the pain is managed, processed and becomes a

demand for justice. In this way, the community acquires a dignity that elevates it far above asbestos.

[...] women are in the front line: for them, mobilisation in defence of the territory begins in continuity with the role they play in the family and community, but at the same time it triggers processes of political subjectivisation and in many cases produces changes that go beyond the specific object and short time of mobilization. (Barca and Guidi 2013, p. 8)

It is precisely on women's management of pain and the commitment of women in different spheres – medical, scholastic, journalistic and of the Casale Monferrato associationism – in the construction of the community narrative of contamination that Silvana Mossano dwells:

In families it is often women who bear the responsibility for grief management, while sometimes men tend to run away. But someone has to do it. And perhaps there is just this temperament: someone has to do it, so we do it. It may be a coincidence, but it is true: Daniela Degiovanni narrated pain through various forms, even poetry, lived in that role, but also in being a doctor she narrated, not just by narrating it, but by doing it, by being a doctor she narrated pain, her way of being a doctor was a narration; I narrated it, I am a chronicler, but then I found myself narrating it anyway; Romana narrated it verbally with extraordinary effectiveness [...]; Assunta Prato, she too, with the tool that was most congenial to her, the one she knew, that was part of her everyday life, teaching. Whether it was coincidence or a vocation, this is what happened. (Oral testimony of Silvana Mossano, Casale Monferrato, 19 February 2018 in Ziglioli, 2018, p. 67)

Silvia Mossano was a young reporter for the local newspaper “Il Monferrato” when in 1984 decided to make her contribution by publishing the alarming results of the epidemiological survey carried out over a decade in Casale Monferrato and from then on became the official voice of asbestos-related events. She certainly would not have imagined, however, that her own personal and family life would one day be the protagonist of those ominous facts: her husband Marco Giorcelli was diagnosed with mesothelioma less than a month after the publication of her successful book *Malapolvere Una città si ribella ai signori dell'amianto* (2010) in which she collects nineteen testimonies from what she defines as “women in the dust”, as well as a reportage on the history of the Eternit settlement and a fictional account of the diagnosis of pleural mesothelioma on a woman, a mother and widow, who is forced to plan what she has left to live on in a few months. Mossano's work will inspire the theatrical monologue *Malapolvere Veleni e Antidoti per*

'Invisibile staged since 2012 throughout Italy by Turin actress Laura Curino. In the above testimony, Mossano mentions two other female points of reference, crucial in the process of transforming asbestos from an exclusively trade union issue of reclamation and compensation to a common, everyday feeling and discourse that gives lifeblood to community identity. Indeed, thanks to the involvement of the new generation and the repositioning of the discourse on an everyday and familiar level, the vision of the community escapes from the clutches of an immobile and painful past to project itself into the future. Daniela Degiovanni and Maria Assunta Prato contribute to passing on the discourse, each in her own field and according to her role: the former as a scientist and oncologist, the latter as a lecturer, through teaching and direct, daily contact with the young.

Even as a young girl, Daniela Degiovanni imagined herself a doctor. She studied medicine in Turin, then specialised in oncology: these were the dawning years of that branch of medicine, when “Umberto Veronesi's group at the Tumour Institute in Milan was beginning to record the first positive results” (Testimony by Daniela Degiovanni in Mossano, 2010, p. 124). The encounter with dust diseases occurred causally: the consultant doctor for pulmonary diseases at the Inca CGIL patronage was about to retire: Daniela took his place and began to fight “on the right side” (Ibid.), against Inail, against asbestos, together with other fierce doctors, trade unionists, lawyers and volunteers. In 1982, she was hired on a permanent basis in the oncology department of the hospital in Casale. There, she met and examined again workers she had already visited when working with the patronage, but not only them: people who had never set foot in the factory came to her. This is how Daniela deepened her understanding of the environmental and community dimension of the disease and began a relentless work of scientific awareness-raising in the area: conferences, meetings, collaborations with medical experts who had certain visibility and thanks to whom she was able to broaden the range and audience of her message: “Be careful, you will die of asbestos” (Ibid.). Daniela was not yet satisfied: in 1996 she founded Vitas, a non-profit organisation that provides home care and palliative care for cancer patients, in this way being close not only to the patient, but also to their families; in 2009 her name stands out among the promoters of the Hospice at the Santo Spirito hospital in Casale, a facility designed to replace patients' homes when they need to be cared for at a sheltered facility. Also in this case, the echo of her commitment reaches the highest institutional summits when she is awarded the title of Cavaliere della Repubblica by President Sergio Mattarella (Ziglioli, 2018).

Maria Assunta Prato was originally from San Salvatore Monferrato and moved to Casale in 1975. In the same year she married Paolo Ferraris. She was a teacher, he an

esteemed exponent of the Christian Democrat left, and at the time it seemed unthinkable for them to cross paths with Eternit, with whom they shared only their municipality of residence. They still perceived asbestos as a blue-collar problem: “[...] I feel sorry for all those who died, but [...] I'm certainly not working at Eternit” (Oral testimony of Maria Assunta Prato, Casale Monferrato 16 February 2018 in Ziglioli, 2018, p. 62). From the time her husband was diagnosed with pleural mesothelioma in 1994, two years and eight months passed before his death that caught him at the age of 49. Maria Assunta transformed her personal mourning into a powerful means of communication designed to reach young people in particular, to whom, she herself realised, information about what was happening was not conveyed effectively and the messages that arrived only created confusion and not knowledge and awareness.

Many teachers were not from Casale; many, however, did not have the sensitivity to the problem; and even those who did have personal sensitivity might not know how to address the issue with 12 year olds, because it's not easy... And then I also thought: what kind of kid goes and reads a book of testimonies of widowers and orphans who mourn for their dead father, mother, wife or husband? [...]. None of the publications made up to then were suitable to talk to kids about this... (Ibidem)

This is how the idea was born to tell the story of Casale Monferrato through the graphic novel entitled *Eternit. Dissolvenza in Bianco* (2011) with texts by Assunta Prato and drawings by Gea Ferraris, which proved to be a very powerful means of information and awareness-raising capable of reaching that segment of the population to which no one knew exactly how to pass the baton of narration. But Prato did not stop there and in 2013 he published, dedicated to the youngest children, the fable *Attenti al Polverino!* later illustrated by the students of the Leardi Institute of Casale. Remarkably effective both graphically and narratively, the fable contains in its ending a real invitation to young readers to participate in the quest for justice: “Now it is your turn: when you grow up you will have to continue to seek justice, to do scientific research, to make the environment healthy and clean”.

In Casale Monferrato, as in Seveso, the reclamation work has resulted in a 29,000 m² park that stands on the very site of the former Eternit factory: the Eternot Park. Contrary to the distance that the “Bosco delle Querce” wants to interpose between what it is today and what it once was, almost as if it wanted to leave out the reason why it is there, the name of the park standing on the ashes of the former Eternit factory carries forward in its name the historical memory of the place and the commitment of its citizens, at the same time putting

an end to the lethal eternity of asbestos, and formalising the completeness of the reclamation work on the site. The reclamation of this area was, indeed, total and complete, thus representing an example that is as virtuous as it is rare in Italy. The message of interconnection between human beings and the environment is even stronger in this case where the success of social justice went hand in hand with that of environmental rehabilitation.

Two main points emerge from the Casale Monferrato case. Firstly, once again, human beings are inextricably linked to everything around them: human beings, animals, plants are united by vulnerability and by a certain invisibility in the face of political abuse. Terry Tempest Williams, facing the risk of being hit by bombs dropped by F-16s during military exercises over the skies of Arizona in the late 1980s, feels invisible, even non-existent in the eyes of those who authorised and made possible what she considers a real act of war against human life and the environment: “They can do with me what they wish: one button, I am dead. I am a random target with the cholla, ocotillo, lizards, and ants. In the company of orange-and-black-beaded gila monsters, I am expendable. No, it's worse than that—we do not exist” (Williams, 2015, p. 123). At the same time, Williams remains inside the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge and refuses to sign the declaration that would have relieved the Air Force of responsibility for damage caused to the Refuge.

Resistance aimed at regaining possession of the place is the second element that emerges from the events in Casale Monferrato. An awareness that transforms non-existence and invisibility into an active and collective policy “rooted in empathy in which we extend our notion of community [...] to include all life forms—plants, animals, rivers, and soils” (Ivi, p. 87). Telling the story of place becomes a political act, and doing so by staying at home and being vigilant becomes a subversive act. Rooting oneself in the place takes on the meaning of knowing it, familiarising with the names of the elements that are part of it, extending the sense of community and our responsibility beyond our rooftops and to all forms of life. Romana Blasotti Pavesi herself fully expresses this amplified meaning of family that is extended to the entire community in the dramatic words: “[...] every time I hear of a case [of pleural mesothelioma], it is as if it were one of my family” (Mossano, 20120, p. 105).

In its fight for justice, as we have seen, it is a story brought to success by the female narrative. Women victims in the role of workers – 780 out of 3443 Eternit employees between 1950 and 1985 were women (Ziglioli, 2018) –, women in the role of mothers, wives, daughters, sisters of those who wore dusty overalls and unwittingly brought

contamination inside their homes, women citizens of Casale who took a stand, resisted, claimed their presence in the place, in this way reaffirming and communicating both the collective memory of the place and their participation in it. Communicating their drama to ensure that it never happens again, standing as a model of what should never have happened, of what did happen, of what must never happen again to anyone else. To be there and tell of having been there. Taking a stand and not retreating before the irresponsibility and prevarication of the asbestos lords, taking part in a button-up process that brings together more and more voices, nourished by an ever-increasing awareness of the sense of belonging to a place, are actions that delineate the politics of place that Williams speaks of, which is “the kind of politics we must be engaged in-nothing marginal, nothing peripheral, nothing inessential, not anymore” (Williams, 2015, p. 140).

Conclusion

The thought of ecofeminist scholars, together with the recounted episodes of environmental justice, lights a beacon and provides an inspiring key to understanding the global crisis in which we are immersed, fuelled by lethal inequalities that – like dioxin in the skies over Brianza – permeate the lungs and scar the skin of those who are most exposed and most vulnerable. Indeed, on the one hand, the lords of asbestos, whose identity is to be traced back to the Swiss Schmidheiny and the Belgians Emsens-De Cartier, represent the richest and most privileged living beings in the world, powerful puppeteers who move strings solely in the name of profit, legitimised and protected in their actions by a capitalist system in which they are largely at ease. On the other side, at the opposite end of the spectrum, factory workers, their families, community dwellers, represent those people who in terms of geographical origin, income, gender and sexual orientation fall into the disadvantaged segment of the population that bear the brunt.

Ecofeminist thought, as I tried to demonstrate in my thesis, offers an analysis of the causes of this fragmented contemporary reality, modelled on hierarchical systems such as sexism, speciesism, colonialism and racism, relating them to the dichotomous conception at the basis of which there is, on the one hand, the consideration of the other as subordinate and hostile; on the other, a presumption of primacy and supremacy of the self. In this system of self-blame, inequalities contribute to exacerbating the distance between the two poles and the pattern of domination intensifies.

The cases of Seveso and Casale Monferrato presented in the last chapter are illustrative of this oppositional approach to the other than self, which results in the consideration of the environment as the main otherness with respect to human beings. Not only: those cases also make explicit the instrumental approach that the master identity adopts towards the environment and the territory, abused and exploited for utilitarian purposes in the same way as its inhabitants. It is also evident how, in the face of the cases presented, the conception of the environment as a mere background to human activities, as well as the idea of nature as idealised, comfortable and safe, crumbles into a thousand pieces. The concepts of porosity between human and non-human, as well as that of trans-corporeality, reconfirm us that, as human beings, we are not above, but within and enmeshed up to our necks in the environment of which we are an integral part. Indeed, the supposed impermeability of the environment to humans, and of humans to the environment, vanishes when it is both human and non-human bodies that become sick.

Thus, no one any longer believes in the illusion of impenetrability between the natural and the social when nature becomes a daily battlefield where the uniforms of the human and the natural fronts hybridise, allying themselves under the banner of ecofeminism for a justice that is as much social as it is natural.

In conclusion, to take up the call of ecofeminist thought to dismantle the current hierarchical and divisive model means to promote an inclusive approach to the struggle for justice, which at the same time counteracts all systems of oppression, on any scale. Responding to this call also implies looking at reality with a critical sense and sensitivity. In this way, in the awareness of our porosity and interconnectedness to the other, we can find a sense of belonging to an open and fluid system that makes us accountable and personally responsible for our everyday actions.

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