

Identity is not destiny: Reflections on the body through reading the Manifesto for Secularly Inspired Pedagogy

L'identità non è destino: riflessioni sul corpo a partire dalla lettura del Manifesto della pedagogia laica

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Abstract

This article proposes a reflection starting from the reading of the *Manifesto for Secularly Inspired Pedagogy* (2026) through the category of the body, seeking to show how embodiment constitutes a significant and transversal dimension of secular pedagogy. Themes such as freedom, pluralism, critical thinking, and democratic participation occupy a central place in the Manifesto; corporeality, while not emerging as an explicit and autonomous theme, runs through many of these reflections as the space where identity, normativity, recognition, and exclusion are materially produced. Drawing on feminist epistemologies, critical studies, disability studies, queer theory, and decolonial perspectives, the article explores the body as a space of situated knowledge, subjectivation, and political legitimacy. Particular attention is devoted to ableism, epistemic injustice, and coloniality as structures that regulate which bodies are considered intelligible, legitimate, and worthy of voice. Secular pedagogy is thus interpreted as a pedagogy of embodied plurality, in which education means defending the right to presence, non-conformity, and unfinished becoming.

Keywords: Manifesto for Secularly Inspired Pedagogy; embodiment; epistemic injustice; decolonial pedagogy; identity.

Sintesi

Questo contributo propone una riflessione a partire dalla lettura del *Manifesto della pedagogia laica* (2026) attraverso la categoria del corpo, cercando di mostrare come l'embodiment costituisca una dimensione significativa e trasversale della pedagogia laica. Temi come la libertà, il pluralismo, il pensiero critico e la partecipazione democratica occupano una posizione centrale nel *Manifesto*; la corporeità, pur non emergendo come tema esplicito e autonomo, attraversa molte di queste riflessioni come luogo in cui identità, normatività, riconoscimento ed esclusione si producono materialmente. A partire dalle epistemologie femministe, dai critical studies e dai disability studies, dalla teoria queer e dalle prospettive decoloniali, l'articolo esplora il corpo come spazio di sapere situato, soggettivazione e legittimità politica. Particolare attenzione è dedicata all'abilismo, all'ingiustizia epistemica e alla colonialità come strutture che regolano quali corpi siano considerati intelligibili, legittimi e degni di parola. La pedagogia laica viene così interpretata come una pedagogia della pluralità incarnata, in cui educare significa difendere il diritto alla presenza, alla non conformità e al divenire incompiuto.

Parole chiave: Manifesto della pedagogia laica; corpo; ingiustizia epistemica; pedagogia decoloniale; identità.

1. Reading the *Manifesto for Secularly Inspired Pedagogy* through the body

The recent *Manifesto for Secularly Inspired Pedagogy* (Movimento della pedagogia laica, (2026), coordinated by Massimo Baldacci, should first be understood as a collective pedagogical and political experiment. It does not present itself as a closed doctrine or as the codification of a single theoretical position, but as the provisional outcome of a plural and dialogical process through which the contemporary meaning of laicity in education is being rethought. Born from the movement of *pedagogia laica* (Secular Pedagogy) and developed through the contribution of numerous scholars working together across different thematic areas, the *Manifesto* reflects an explicitly shared attempt to define what a secular pedagogy can mean today, starting from the urgencies of the present and from the need to defend democratic education against new forms of dogmatism. Its emergence is rooted in a precise historical and cultural concern: the reappearance of ideological radicalisms, religious fundamentalisms, ethnic essentialisms, sovereign nationalisms, and new authoritarian and totalitarian impulses. Faced with these phenomena, the *Manifesto* proposes the relaunch of a secular culture and of a pedagogy inspired by laicity, understood not as opposition to religion, but as a radical commitment to freedom of thought, antidogmatism, plurality, and the autonomy of human experience. This collective dimension is not secondary, but constitutive. The *Manifesto* itself recognizes pluralism as one of its founding principles: it is not the expression of a unified orthodoxy, but the result of an open confrontation among different pedagogical sensibilities that share the refusal of every form of intellectual closure and educational authoritarianism. In this sense, it is very method embodies one of its central theses: truth is not possession, but a process; it is produced through dialogue, critique, and the willingness to remain exposed to revision. Secular pedagogy is therefore not a finished model, but a field of tension and continuous construction.

Within both Italian and broader democratic pedagogical traditions, laicity has been understood as a defense of intellectual autonomy, plurality, and critical freedom than as a mere *opposition* to any form of religion. From Nicola Abbagnano's definition of the reciprocal autonomy of the spheres of human activity (1961), to Norberto Bobbio's idea of laicity as a method of doubt and antidogmatism (2014), and Paulo Freire's conception of education as a practice of freedom (1970), secular pedagogy emerges as a project of emancipation against any form of intellectual and political domination. Similarly, John Dewey (1916) conceived education as the cultivation of reflective thinking, democratic participation, and the capacity to inhabit uncertainty rather than obedience to fixed truths. As Thesis 2 of the *Manifesto* states, "the secular stance recognise doubt and uncertainty as the coordinates of the human condition" (Movimento della pedagogia laica, 2026, Thesis 2), rejecting essentialism and thinking truth as an open and provisional process rather than as a stable possession. This perspective has immediate pedagogical consequences. Education cannot be reduced to adaptation to pre-existing norms; it must become a practice of emancipation, critical reflection, and democratic subjectivation. Identity itself, as stated in Thesis 1, is not destiny, inheritance, or condemnation, but a dynamic and relational process shaped through freedom, choice, and encounter with alterity. Critique, dissent, and conflict are therefore not failures of education, but essential conditions for the formation of autonomous subjects and for the vitality of democratic life (ibidem).

Reading through the *Manifesto*, the body emerges as a crucial and transversal pedagogical dimension. Questions of corporeality run through many of its central theses: identity as a process rather than destiny (Thesis 1), freedom as self-determination and critical autonomy (Theses 2 and 8), the critique of gendered inequalities and the pedagogical relevance of

feminist languages and practices (Thesis 9), the rejection of educational censorship around sexuality, gender, religion, and multiculturalism (Thesis 10), and the recognition of subjectivity as relational, situated, and generated through alterity (Thesis 23). The body emerges wherever education encounters the tension between normativity and freedom, between imposed identities and the possibility of becoming.

A particularly significant passage appears in Thesis 16, where schools and universities are described as educational ecosystems that promote democratic relationships and community bonds by “valuing the body and presence” (“valorizzando corpo e presenza”) (Movimento della pedagogia laica, 2026, Thesis 16). This is the only explicit direct reference to the body in the *Manifesto*, and for this reason it acquires particular theoretical relevance. Even if corporeality is not developed as an autonomous theme, this brief formulation reveals that embodiment already belongs to the *Manifesto*’s understanding of educational relations, participation, and belonging. Reading this passage more closely allows us to recognize that the body is not an external addition to secular pedagogy, but one of its transversal dimensions. Wherever education confronts identity, freedom, recognition, exclusion, and the possibility of democratic participation, the body is already present as the place where these tensions are materially lived. The body should be understood as a constitutive pedagogical question, one that connects subjectivity to social and political life. The body never appears as a neutral presence. It is always socially interpreted, regulated, and positioned through norms that define visibility, legitimacy, and belonging. Recognizing embodiment as a constitutive pedagogical dimension also requires examining the power relations that shape which bodies are allowed to appear, speak, and be recognized. Gender expression, racialization, disability, sexuality, class inscription, and religious visibility shape the ways in which subjects are recognized – or denied recognition – within educational and social spaces. These dimensions are never simply individual characteristics; they are interpreted through cultural and institutional frameworks that establish legitimacy, respectability, normality, and belonging (Crenshaw, 1991; Butler, 1990; Bourdieu, 1984). Embodiment becomes a site where power operates through processes of classification and hierarchization, defining which forms of life appear acceptable, intelligible, or endowed with symbolic value – *capital symbolique*, in Bourdieusian terms.

A special attention should be paid to ableism as a pervasive yet often normalized form of discrimination. In public discourse as well as in educational institutions, too, disability is frequently constructed through deficit-oriented perspectives that reduce the subject to lack, dependence, or deviation from an assumed norm of bodily efficiency and autonomy. As disability studies and critical pedagogy have shown, the issue does not reside in the body itself, but in the social and educational structures that define certain bodies as inadequate, problematic, or less fully human (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Goodley, 2014). Educational spaces often reproduce these dynamics through implicit expectations of performance, productivity, self-control, and normative development, turning difference into deficiency and inclusion into a conditional concession rather than a democratic principle. From a secular pedagogical perspective, questioning ableism means challenging the silent naturalization of the “normal body” and recognizing dependency, vulnerability, and interdependence as constitutive dimensions of human existence rather than exceptions to it. To speak of secular pedagogy without fully interrogating the body risks leaving intact precisely those mechanisms of normalization through which dogmatism often operates most powerfully. Bodies are among the first places where essentialism is imposed: where identity is naturalized, where difference is transformed into deficiency, and where freedom is reduced by prescriptions concerning how one should appear, desire, move, or belong.

For all these reasons, the body must be understood as a central pedagogical question. It is the place where norms are inscribed, where recognition is granted or denied, and where freedom becomes materially possible or impossible. To educate for freedom also means questioning the conditions that define which bodies are considered legitimate, intelligible, and worthy of voice. Starting from this assumption, this article proposes a reflection on the role of the body in secular pedagogy, taking the *Manifesto* as its points of departure. The central argument is that secular pedagogy requires an explicit engagement with embodiment as a site of identity formation, subjectivation, and political recognition. Bringing into dialogue the *Manifesto*'s theses with feminist, decolonial, queer, and disability studies perspectives, the article explores how the defense of laicity is inseparable from the defense of embodied plurality. A democratic pedagogy cannot exist where bodies are reduced to destiny.

2. The body as situated knowledge

If secular pedagogy is grounded in freedom, plurality, and the refusal of dogmatism, then the body must be recognized as one of its primary epistemological sites. Knowledge never emerges from a neutral or disembodied position; it is produced through lived experience, affective relations, social location, and corporeal encounters with the world. The subject who knows is always situated – historically, politically, and bodily. This challenges one of the most persistent assumptions of traditional educational thought: the idea that knowledge can be transmitted as if it were detached from the life of those who produce it and those who receive it. Educational institutions have often privileged abstraction, neutrality, and distance, separating mind from body and reason from experience. Yet such neutrality is never truly universal. It often corresponds to the invisibility of dominant positions, where masculine, white, able-bodied, heterosexual, and socially privileged forms of embodiment are treated as the unmarked norm, while other bodies are read as deviations requiring explanation.

Feminist epistemologies have long criticized this fiction. Donna Haraway (1988) argues that all knowledge is situated: there is no view from nowhere, no neutral gaze capable of observing reality from outside relations of power. Every act of knowing emerges from a specific position, shaped by history, embodiment, and social location. This does not weaken knowledge; rather, it makes responsibility and reflexivity possible. To recognize situated knowledge means acknowledging that experience matters, and that what can be seen depends on where one stands. As a consequence, education cannot be understood as the simple transmission of universal truths from those who know to those who supposedly lack knowledge. Learning takes place through bodies, through relations, through vulnerability and presence. Teaching must involve the whole person: emotions, desire, sexuality, memory, pain, and pleasure are not external to education, but part of the conditions through which learning becomes meaningful (hooks, 1994). The classroom is therefore a political and embodied space where power, silence, and recognition are constantly negotiated.

This is particularly evident when considering marginalized subjects. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) shows that exclusion does not only produce silence; it can also generate critical knowledge. Those who inhabit positions of marginality – through race, gender, class, migration, disability, or sexuality – often perceive contradictions that remain invisible from dominant locations. The “outsider within” becomes capable of reading structures of power precisely because they are experienced directly in the body. From this perspective,

embodied experience is not a limit to knowledge, but one of its possible sources. Several philosophical traditions have also placed the body at the center of reflection, particularly phenomenological thought, which challenged the modern separation between mind and body by rethinking subjectivity as always embodied and relational. Starting from Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), the body is no longer understood as an object that we possess, but as the very condition through which we perceive, inhabit, and make sense of the world. Subjectivity does not precede experience; it emerges through corporeal relations with space, with others, and with language. Educational processes are therefore always embodied processes: one learns through gesture, voice, presence, absence, proximity, shame, desire, and exposure.

Bodies do not differ only from one another, placing subjects in different positions in relation to power, recognition, and access to knowledge. They also change over time, just as identities change through the lived experience of embodiment. The body cannot be understood as a stable origin, a natural destiny, or a definitive foundation of the self; it is a relational process, shaped by vulnerability, transformation, conflict, and encounter. Identity does not exist prior to experience as a fixed essence waiting to be discovered. It takes form through relationships, through material conditions of existence, and through the continuous negotiation between self and world. This has profound implications for secular pedagogy, because it resists deterministic and prescriptive readings of the subject and supports a view of education grounded in openness and becoming. Rosi Braidotti (2013) offers an important contribution in this direction. Her posthuman and feminist perspective refuses the image of the subject as autonomous, self-contained, and permanently stable. Subjectivity appears instead as dynamic, grounded in corporeality, and produced through interdependence. Freedom, in this sense, is linked to the capacity to inhabit transformation within relations of dependency and coexistence. Such an approach is particularly relevant for secular pedagogy because it unsettles essentialist conceptions of identity and supports a non-dogmatic understanding of the self, where plurality and change are constitutive conditions of human existence.

Reading the body as situated knowledge also requires asking whose experience is recognized as legitimate within educational spaces. Curricula, institutional practices, and pedagogical relations distribute authority unevenly: some voices are treated as universal, others as partial; some bodies are read as naturally competent, others as problematic or excessive. A secular pedagogy committed to plurality must challenge this hierarchy. It must ask who is allowed to speak, whose suffering is believed, whose difference is pathologized, and whose presence is considered fully compatible with the educational space. In this sense, Giorgio Agamben's (1995) reflection on "bare life" helps illuminate how power operates by distinguishing between lives that are fully recognized and lives that remain exposed, precarious, and politically negligible. Educational institutions can reproduce similar mechanisms whenever certain subjects are tolerated only conditionally, included without full recognition, or reduced to bodies to be managed rather than voices to be heard. The body, then, is not simply one pedagogical theme among others. It is where identity, power, recognition, and knowledge intersect. To recognize embodiment as an epistemological condition means refusing the abstraction of the universal subject and affirming that education always begins from situated lives. In this sense, the body is not only what pedagogy addresses; it is one of the conditions through which pedagogy itself becomes possible.

3. “Identity is not destiny”: Notes for a critical discussion

One of the most significant statements of the *Manifesto* appears in Thesis 1: identity is neither destiny, inheritance, nor condemnation. This affirmation exceeds the boundaries of a pedagogical principle and becomes an ontological and political position. It questions every essentialist understanding of the subject and proposes identity as a process shaped through time, freedom, choice, and encounters with alterity. Educational institutions have often contributed to the opposite movement: transforming difference into hierarchy and experience into prescription. Gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, and cultural belonging are frequently interpreted through deterministic logics that reduce subjects to presumed origins, prescribing what they should be, desire, or become. The body becomes the privileged site of this operation, treated as evidence of a destiny already written in advance. Secular pedagogy should interrupt this mechanism by defending the openness of subjectivity. Educational work begins where determinism loses its authority: in the possibility of becoming otherwise. Education concerns the conditions through which subjects can inhabit their own transformation without being imprisoned by inherited categories or normative expectations. This anti-essentialist horizon finds an important philosophical resonance in the Italian landscape in Gianni Vattimo’s theory of *weak thought* (*pensiero debole*) (1983). In questioning metaphysical absolutes and stable foundations, Vattimo proposes a conception of existence grounded in plurality, interpretation, and historical situatedness. Identity appears as an open and relational process rather than as an essence waiting to be discovered. The weakening of strong identities does not produce loss, but creates the conditions for freedom, allowing subjects to exist without the violence of definitive definitions (*ibidem*).

The same problem emerges clearly in feminist and queer pedagogies. What often appears as “natural identity” is produced through repetition, recognition, and social regulation. Gender, for example, takes shape within norms that establish legitimacy and intelligibility, as Judith Butler (1990) argues in *Gender Trouble*. Educational work therefore concerns the possibility of questioning the norms themselves, rather than simply asking how to include subjects who are perceived as different within already established frameworks. The issue becomes even more complex when identities are crossed by multiple and simultaneous forms of power. Race, gender, class, migration status, disability, and sexuality do not operate separately; they intersect and produce specific forms of vulnerability and exclusion. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) has shown in her work on intersectionality, intersectionality concerns not the sum of discriminations, but their structural simultaneity. Identity is therefore never a single category, but a field of overlapping structures and lived contradictions.

Recognition requires the capacity to hold multiplicity, rather than reducing subjects to simplified classifications. These dynamics become visible first of all through the body, which is often treated as the surface on which identity must appear coherent, readable, and socially legitimate. Educational institutions frequently regulate bodies before they regulate ideas, establishing implicit norms about gender expression, sexuality, ability, respectability, and belonging. For this reason, questioning identity as destiny also means questioning the pedagogies of normalization that discipline bodies in the name of order, intelligibility, and conformity. Taking identity seriously does not mean fixing it. History, memory, social location, and embodied conditions remain central, but they do not function as prisons. Educational practice cannot erase difference, yet it can refuse its naturalization. It can create spaces where subjects are recognized in their situatedness without being entirely defined by it. This is why identity and freedom remain inseparable in the *Manifesto*.

Freedom does not coincide with an abstract and unlimited possibility of choice; it concerns the concrete possibility of inhabiting one's own becoming without total submission to inherited roles and imposed labels. Schools and universities are called to become spaces where subjects can narrate themselves beyond normalization, where difference is not treated as deviation, and where recognition does not depend on conformity. To affirm that identity is not destiny means, ultimately, defending education as critical practices of possibility. It means recognizing, with Paulo Freire (1970), that human beings are fundamentally unfinished beings, aware of their own incompleteness, and that education begins precisely in this awareness. Freedom resides in the possibility of becoming, not in the obligation to correspond to a predefined form. Human beings are not called to fulfill a fixed essence, but to inhabit the open and unfinished project of becoming.

4. Freedom, normativity, and non-conformity

Freedom occupies a central place in the *Manifesto*, where it is understood as one of the fundamental conditions of democratic education. It does not coincide with simple individual choice or with the abstract absence of constraints. Freedom concerns the possibility of developing critical autonomy, inhabiting uncertainty, and resisting those forms of power that transform obedience into normality. For this reason, the *Manifesto* connects freedom with doubt, dissent, and conflict, recognizing them as essential educational experiences rather than disruptions to be neutralized. Thesis 2 places uncertainty at the heart of the secular posture. Doubt is not presented as weakness, but as an ethical and epistemological condition that protects education from dogmatism. Truth is approached as a provisional and revisable process, always open to discussion and transformation. This has direct consequences for the body, because many forms of domination operate precisely by presenting norms as natural facts: the "right" body, the "normal" sexuality, the "appropriate" gender expression, the legitimate family, the acceptable way of inhabiting desire or vulnerability.

Normativity works most effectively when it becomes invisible. Educational institutions often reproduce these standards through ordinary practices: dress codes, disciplinary expectations, assumptions about emotional expression, moral judgments around sexuality, or implicit models of masculinity and femininity. These mechanisms rarely appear as violence; they are presented as common sense, decorum, maturity, or responsibility. As Michel Foucault (1975) has shown, power often operates most effectively through normalization rather than prohibition: bodies are disciplined not only by explicit sanctions, but by the internalization of norms that define what is acceptable, healthy, productive, and desirable. Educational spaces participate in this process whenever conformity is rewarded as maturity and divergence is treated as deficiency or disorder. In a similar way, Judith Butler (1990) describes gender as a repeated stylization of the body, produced through the reiteration of norms that appear natural precisely because they are constantly performed. Freedom therefore cannot be reduced to abstract autonomy; it concerns the concrete possibility of inhabiting one's own body without total submission to these normative expectations. Yet they define which bodies can move without suspicion and which bodies must constantly justify their presence. Freedom becomes concrete where subjects can inhabit their bodies without compulsory conformity to dominant norms of gender, sexuality, productivity, beauty, or emotional discipline. The relationship between body and identity is therefore inseparable from the question of freedom: wherever the body is regulated as destiny, subjectivity is reduced and democratic education becomes weaker.

This is why Thesis 3 attributes a positive educational value to critique, dissent, and conflict. Subjectivity is formed through the capacity to recognize and question the powers that shape it. The subject does not exist prior to educational relations; it emerges within the intersection of practices, discourses, and material *dispositifs*. Learning to disagree, to resist normalization, and to inhabit conflict becomes part of democratic formation itself. This perspective resonates with the concept of conscientization, where education is understood as the development of critical awareness capable of unveiling oppression and opening possibilities for transformation (Freire, 1970): real freedom requires the ability to read the world and to recognize how domination becomes internalized as self-evidence. The body is often the first terrain where this internalization occurs: shame, silence, fear, and conformity are learned before they are consciously named.

The *Manifesto*'s insistence on freedom also recalls again Michel Foucault's reflection (1975) on disciplinary power, even if from a different pedagogical horizon. Schools have historically functioned as spaces where bodies are organized, observed, corrected, and normalized. Timetables, gestures, postures, visibility, and evaluation all participate in the production of acceptable subjects. A similar concern emerges in Giorgio Agamben's (1995) reflection on the political management of life, where power operates by deciding which forms of existence are fully recognized and which remain exposed to regulation without full legitimacy. Educational institutions participate in this process whenever bodies are included only through normalization rather than through genuine recognition, transforming belonging into conditional acceptance. A secular pedagogy cannot ignore this dimension: it must ask how educational institutions discipline bodies and how freedom can be practiced within these same spaces. Freedom, then, also concerns the right to non-conformity. It concerns the legitimacy of inhabiting one's body without compulsory adherence to dominant norms of gender, productivity, beauty, emotional control, or success. This does not mean celebrating individual transgression as an isolated act but creating collective conditions where plurality can exist without punishment. Thesis 8 makes this explicit by linking freedom to empowerment, self-determination, and critical dialogue. Education becomes a practice through which subjects learn to exercise autonomy in relation with others, rather than submission disguised as adaptation. Freedom is relational, because it depends on recognition; one cannot become free in spaces where one's body is constantly rendered illegitimate. Seen in this light, secular pedagogy must be understood as a pedagogy of non-conformity. Its task is not to produce normalized subjects capable of efficient adaptation, but to cultivate forms of life able to question what appears inevitable. Freedom begins where the body ceases to be treated as a problem to be corrected and becomes a legitimate place from which to speak, resist, and imagine otherwise.

5. Voice, agency, and embodied epistemic justice

Language occupies a central place in the *Manifesto* because subjectivity takes form through the possibility of speaking, being recognized, and participating in the construction of meaning. Thesis 24 makes this explicit: the subject exists as such when it possesses a language capable of acting politically upon the world. Voice is therefore a condition of agency, legitimacy, and democratic belonging. Again, this question is inseparable from the body. Every voice is embodied: it emerges through presence, accent, gesture, silence, vulnerability, exposure, and the social readability of the speaker. Educational institutions do not regulate only what can be said; they also regulate whose words are considered credible, whose emotions are interpreted as rational or excessive, and which bodies are

perceived as naturally authorized to occupy public space. Speaking is never only a linguistic act; it is also a corporeal and political one.

Here, the problem of epistemic injustice becomes central: this specific kind of injustice analyzed by Miranda Fricker (2007) occurs when subjects are wronged specifically in their capacity as knowers. For instance, testimonial injustice emerges when credibility is denied because of prejudice attached to the speaker's social identity; hermeneutical injustice appears when experiences cannot be fully articulated because the available interpretive frameworks exclude them. Educational spaces reproduce both forms whenever some bodies are heard as naturally authoritative while others remain structurally unintelligible. Certain subjects are excluded not only from rights or representation, but from recognition as legitimate knowers. Their experiences are dismissed as subjective, emotional, partial, or insufficiently universal. Women, racialized subjects, migrants, disabled people, queer students, and socially marginalized groups are often required to translate their own lives into dominant languages before they can be heard. The issue is not the absence of speech, but the unequal distribution of credibility. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) reminds us, the problem is often not giving voice but learning how to listen when that voice exceeds dominant epistemic frameworks. Subaltern subjects are frequently invited to speak only insofar as their experience becomes intelligible within already established categories. Secular pedagogy requires a more difficult task: transforming the conditions of listening itself. As work on epistemic injustice has shown, silence is mostly produced by institutions rather than chosen by individuals (Fricker, 2007). The denial of credibility, the devaluation of testimony, and the exclusion of lived experience from legitimate knowledge are forms of pedagogical violence that shape educational trajectories long before formal exclusion occurs. What is at stake is not only participation, but the authority to name reality from one's own position. In the Italian pedagogical tradition, this question recalls two authors: Lorenzo Milani and Danilo Dolci. Milani insisted that language is never neutral and that the right to words is inseparable from the right to citizenship. Educational exclusion often begins where subjects are denied the possibility of naming their own world, or where their language is treated as inadequate, incorrect, or socially illegitimate (Milani, 1967). A similar perspective can be found in Dolci's maieutic approach (1988), which challenged vertical and transmissive models of education by foregrounding dialogue, reciprocal learning, and the collective production of knowledge. Educational authority becomes legitimate only when it creates the conditions for others to speak and to be recognized as subjects of knowledge rather than passive recipients of instruction (*ibidem*).

Feminist and decolonial pedagogies have insisted precisely on this point: knowledge is situated, and embodied experience is one of its sources rather than a limit to objectivity. Marginalized subjects often produce critical forms of knowledge because they inhabit the contradictions of power directly in their bodies. The experiences of migration, racism, sexism, ableism, precarity, and exclusion generate forms of reading the world that remain invisible from dominant locations. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues, the "outsider within" occupies a position from which structures of domination become particularly visible. Similarly, decolonial perspectives remind us that universal knowledge has often functioned as the language of exclusion, silencing other epistemologies in the name of neutrality. The feminist perspective recalled in Thesis 9 becomes particularly relevant here. Language is never neutral: it distributes legitimacy, authority, and the possibility of appearing as a speaking subject. Educational spaces often reproduce patriarchal and colonial hierarchies through apparently ordinary practices of evaluation, participation, and recognition, deciding whose words are heard as competent and whose experience is treated as merely personal or excessive. In this sense, bell hooks' reflection on engaged pedagogy

is especially significant. Education becomes transformative when subjects are allowed to speak from lived experience without being required to erase difference in order to become acceptable. As she writes, “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (hooks, 1994, p. 12), precisely because it can become a place where domination is interrupted rather than reproduced.

6. Decolonizing bodies, decolonizing pedagogy

A reflection on bodies within secular pedagogy cannot remain limited to questions of individual recognition or interpersonal inclusion. Bodies are also shaped by historical structures of domination that exceed the educational institution and organize visibility, legitimacy, and vulnerability on a broader political scale. Coloniality is one of these structures. The body has been one of its primary terrains: classified, racialized, sexualized, and hierarchized according to regimes of power that continue to inform contemporary educational and social life. According to Lugones (2007), “the modern colonial system imposed gender categories that did not exist in the societies it invaded” (p. 187). Gender itself cannot therefore be treated as a neutral or universal category but must be understood as historically produced within colonial relations of domination. The regulation of bodies has always been inseparable from the production of hierarchies of race, sexuality, and humanity. The modern idea of the subject has never been neutral. It has often been constructed around specific norms of humanity – white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, economically productive, and culturally dominant – while other forms of embodiment were positioned as deficient, excessive, dangerous, or in need of correction. What appears as universal reason has frequently functioned as a mechanism of exclusion. Educational institutions have historically participated in this process by legitimizing some knowledges and silencing others, transforming cultural hierarchy into pedagogical normality. Aníbal Quijano’s notion of the coloniality of power (2000) helps to clarify this continuity. Colonial domination did not end with formal decolonization; it persists through epistemic hierarchies, racial classifications, and social structures that define whose knowledge counts and whose bodies remain governable (ibidem). Race is not a biological fact but a political technology that organizes labor, legitimacy, and access to full humanity. Educational systems continue to reproduce these divisions whenever neutrality conceals the persistence of exclusion. This becomes particularly visible in the experience of racialized and migrant bodies, whose presence in schools and universities is often filtered through suspicion, paternalism, or conditional hospitality. They are asked to integrate, adapt, and prove their legitimacy before being recognized as full subjects of knowledge. Inclusion, once again, becomes conditional acceptance. According to Sara Ahmed’s (2012) analysis, institutions are often oriented toward certain bodies more than others. Whiteness functions as an institutional orientation that shapes who appears naturally in place and who is perceived as out of place. Educational spaces, too, are organized through histories of belonging that make some presences appear ordinary and others permanently exceptional. Nirmal Puwar (2004) deepens this reflection by showing how certain bodies are perceived as “space invaders”: bodies that do not conform to the implicit order of institutional space and therefore become hyper-visible, monitored, and problematized. Racialized, queer, dissident, and politically non-conforming subjects are often treated as bodies out of place, whose very presence is read as disruption. They are often seen before they are heard, classified before they are understood, and forced into a condition of permanent justification. Visibility itself becomes a form of surveillance, where presence is never neutral but constantly exposed to control. Frantz Fanon (1952) had already shown how colonial power

operates through the body by producing what he described as epidermalization: the experience of being reduced to one's visible difference, trapped within the external gaze of racial classification. The body becomes overdetermined from outside. One does not simply have a body; one is assigned a place within a hierarchy of humanity. Divergent identity is never a secondary detail; it is often what transforms a person into a target of surveillance, control, or even repression. Schools must critically reflect on who is visible and who is rendered invisible, on which bodies are considered naturally legitimate and which are constantly asked to justify their presence. Questioning dominant narratives and creating conditions where all voices can be heard and represented is not an additional ethical gesture, but a central task of democratic education.

A secular pedagogy committed to democracy must therefore also be a decolonial pedagogy. It cannot defend plurality while leaving untouched the hierarchies that decide which bodies are already considered universal and which must constantly justify their existence. Decolonizing education means questioning the supposed neutrality of curricula, institutional norms, and pedagogical authority. It means recognizing embodied knowledges that emerge from histories of exclusion and treating them as part of the collective production of knowledge. This does not concern only representation, but the transformation of the conditions under which subjects can appear, speak, and be believed. The defense of laicity requires more than freedom from dogma; it requires freedom from those epistemic and political structures that naturalize inequality through the body. A secular pedagogy becomes fully democratic only when it confronts coloniality as one of the deepest forms of normalization still operating within educational life. The body is central to this process because recognition passes through visibility. Some bodies are immediately perceived as competent, rational, and respectable; others enter educational spaces already marked by suspicion, fragility, excess, or deficiency. Presence itself becomes conditional. Students and educators whose bodies deviate from dominant norms of gender, race, class, ability, religion, or sexuality are often invited to participate only on the condition that they minimize conflict and make themselves legible within existing expectations.

Moreover, secular pedagogy cannot be satisfied with this conditional inclusion. Its task concerns the construction of educational spaces where plurality is recognized as a democratic condition and where embodied knowledge is treated as part of collective learning. This also requires attention to the implicit curriculum: the ordinary gestures, institutional habits, and relational codes through which legitimacy is distributed. Who is interrupted, who is believed, whose body is considered disruptive, whose discomfort is ignored – these are epistemological questions before they become disciplinary ones. The right to education therefore includes the right to presence: the possibility of inhabiting educational space without one's body being treated as an exception to be managed. It includes the right to speak without first proving one's legitimacy, and the right for lived experience to enter knowledge without being reduced to anecdote. Pedagogy becomes *secular and democratic* when it protects this right to presence and recognizes that agency begins where bodies are no longer required to ask permission in order to belong. Voice, in this sense, is never separate from embodiment: it is the political form through which subjects become visible, intelligible, and capable of transforming the world they inhabit.

Reading the *Manifesto* through the body ultimately allows us to further appreciate the depth of its secular pedagogical horizon. Freedom, plurality, critical thought, and democratic participation are not abstract principles separated from lived experience; they take shape through embodied existence, through the concrete conditions in which subjects can appear, speak, and be recognized. The *Manifesto* offers a fertile framework for this reflection,

showing how education becomes democratic when it protects the possibility of inhabiting difference without transforming it into destiny. The defense of laicity is, therefore, inseparable from the defense of embodied plurality: a secular pedagogy fully realizes its democratic vocation where every subject can belong, participate, and transform the world while remaining fully recognized in the corporeal dimension through which that experience is lived.

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