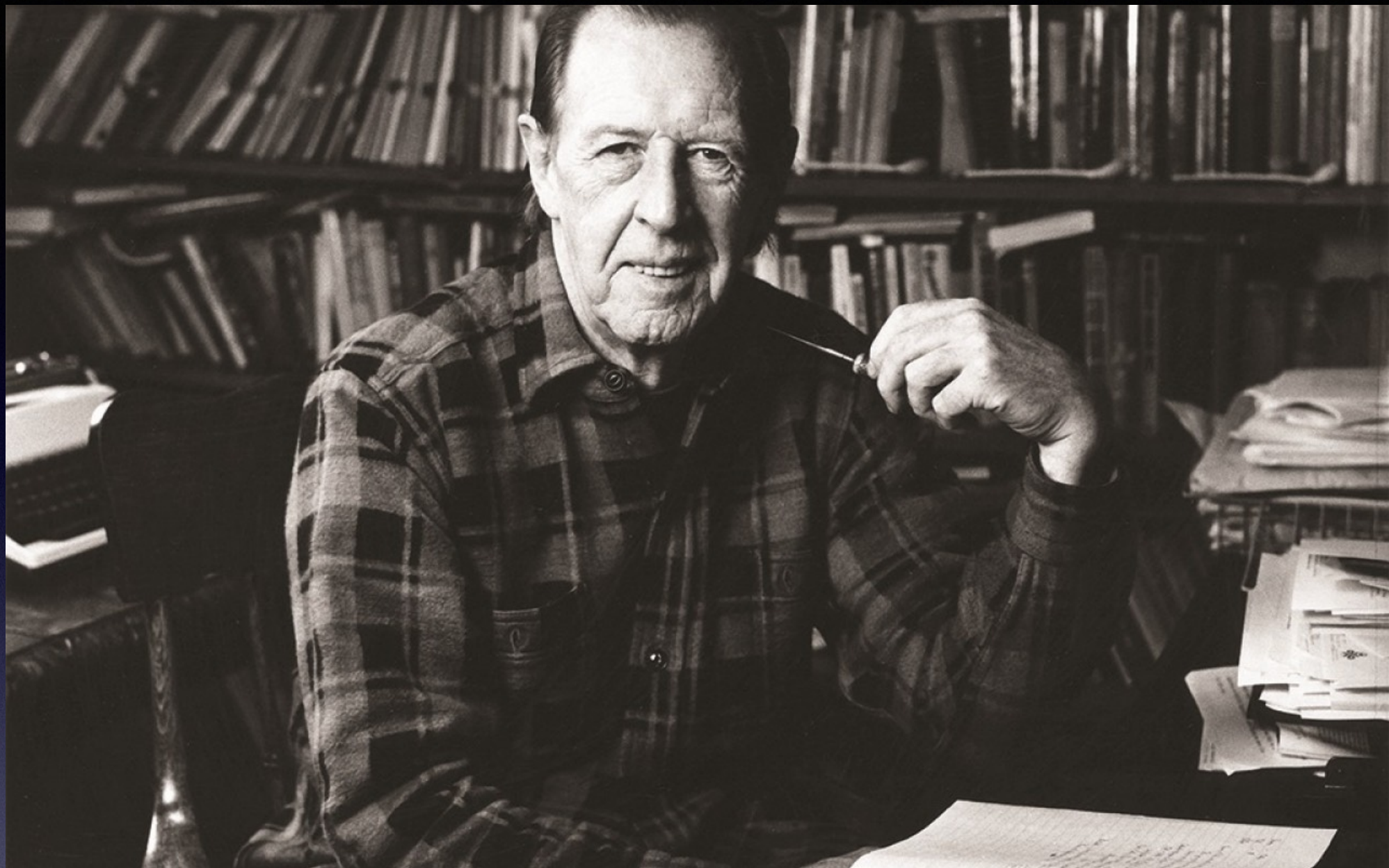


Nature and gender

Dr Andy Letcher

What do we mean by 'nature'?



Raymond Williams

“perhaps the most complex word in the [English]
language”

For Williams

1. The essential quality of something
2. The inherent force which directs the world or human beings or both
3. The material world, including (or usually not) humans

- supernatural
- natural
- unnatural

Are we disconnected from nature?

“Everything in the world that is unaffected by
humanity”

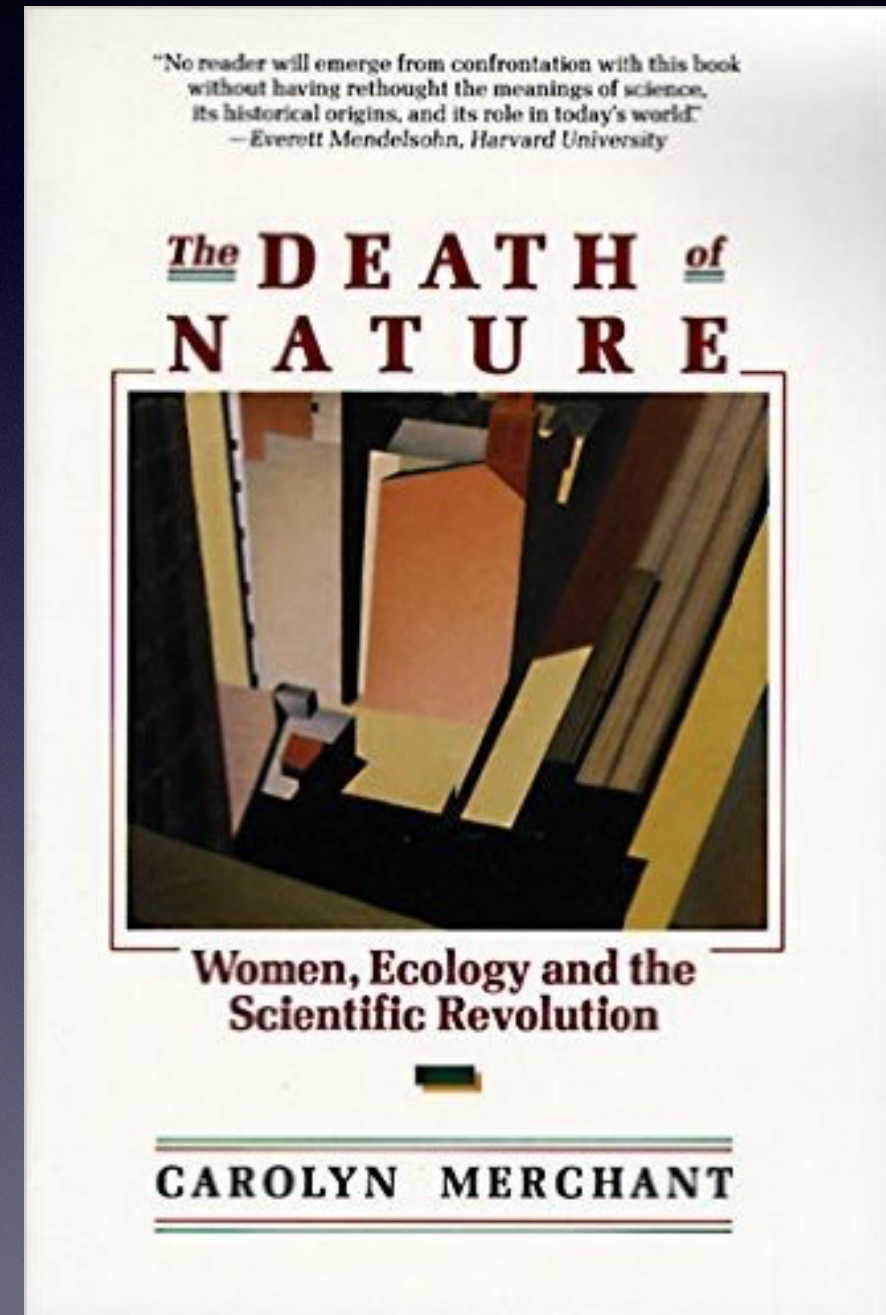
Ecofeminism

- Posits that the subjugation of women, and of nature, are linked
- Part of the same operations of **patriarchy**
- term coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* 1974

- ecofeminism is both: an environmental critique of feminism; a feminist critique of environmentalism
- all forms of oppression are connected
- structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality

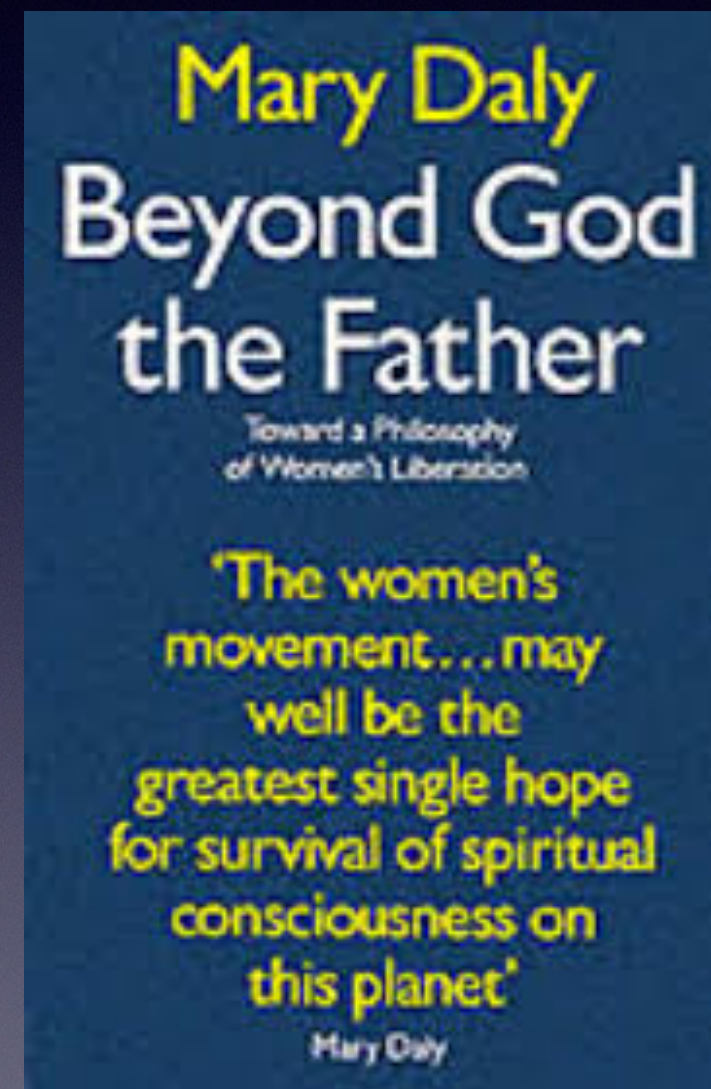
Carolyn Merchant

- *The Death of Nature* 1980
- Change from animistic/vitalistic view to mechanistic view of nature
- Formative scientists like Francis Bacon (1561-1626) used misogynist language when describing nature



Mary Daly

- *Beyond God the Father* 1973
- *Genesis*: woman born of man is a complete inversion of the facts
- appropriates women's power and hands it to men





Monica Sjöo (1938-2005)

Patriarchy

- Justifies oppression by recourse to a set of binary oppositions
- These oppositions are regarded as 'natural'



Val Plumwood

‘hyperseparation’

Binary oppositions

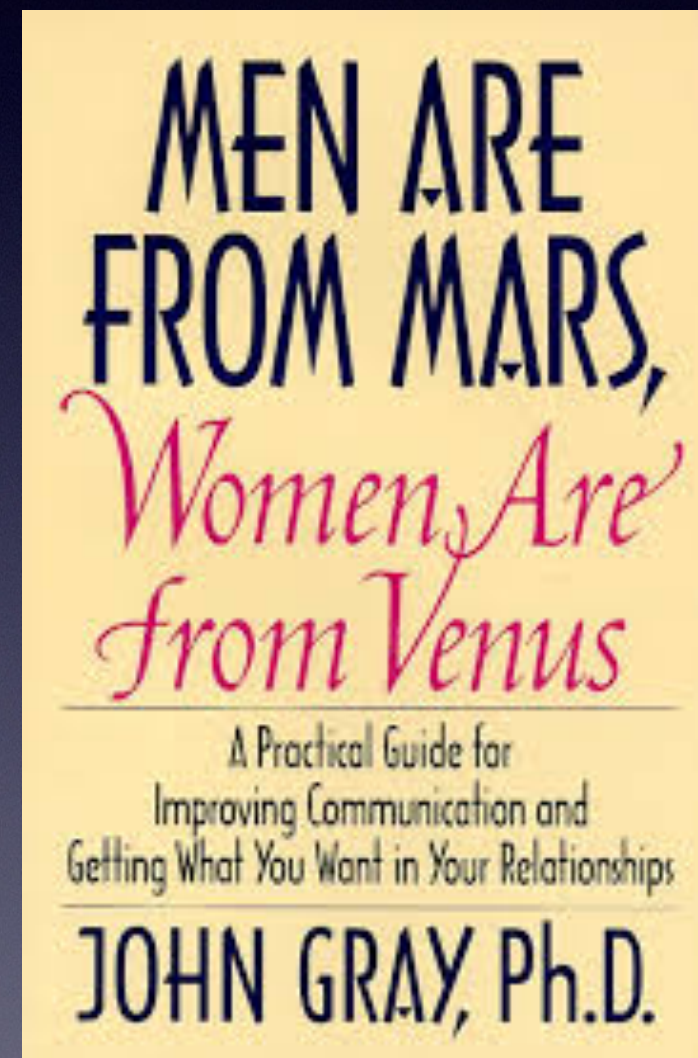
Male	Female
Light	Dark
Heaven	Earth
Mind	Body
Human	Animal
Culture	Nature
Spirit	Matter
White	Non-white
Active	Passive

Binary oppositions

Male	Female
Light	Dark
Heaven	Earth
Mind	Body
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John Gray

- *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*
- Takes current gender stereotypes and renders them as 'natural'



Binary oppositions

Male	Female
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Goddess spirituality

- privileges women's spiritual experience
- 'innate' connection to nature, through menstrual cycle, childbirth
- Glastonbury Goddess Conference



Critique

- Idealisation of motherhood
- Gender essentialism
- Which derives in turn from Plato

Plato

- there are two worlds: the messy, imperfect world that we inhabit
- the ideal or perfect world of forms, ruled ultimately by 'the Good'

To speak of 'woman'

- is to essentialise
- typically, that means white, educated, middle class

Gender essentialism

- a form of anthropocentrism?
- mushroom-producing fungi have several hundred 'mating types'



Queer theory

- sex and gender are not the same
- challenges binary oppositions
- refuses essentialism
- exposes the 'normal'

If childbirth links women to nature

- where does that leave women who do not want children?
- (arguably, they're doing a great service to the planet by choosing not to reproduce)

Binary oppositions

Male	Female
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A queer ecology

- Might seek to expose the ways in which certain ways of engaging with nature are legitimised, made normal
- Challenge any gender essentialism
- Or indeed, the idea of 'nature'

Some indigenous cultures

- accommodate 'third sex', especially in shamanism
- shamans may marry 'spirits' or be called to change gender
- berdache
- all oppressed by Western imperial powers

Where does this leave ecofeminism?

Intersectionality

- age, gender, race, disability, sexuality, ethnicity
- but where is ecology?
- must challenge all structures of oppression, including ecology

- ecofeminism is both: an environmental critique of feminism; a feminist critique of environmentalism
- all forms of oppression are connected
- structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality

So

- in many regards, the ecofeminist critique remains correct