



Women and Nature: The Ecofeminist Debate

JESSICA NEWBOROUGH

What is Ecofeminism?

- Taking elements of Feminism and the Green Movements and applying these as a challenge to both.
- Patriarchy responsible for the oppression of women and environmental degradation.
- Women as more immediately affected by environmental damage.
- Aim to recreate a humanity in harmony with it's ecosystem: "all living organisms must be seen in relation to their natural environment." (Mellor, 1997)

Concept

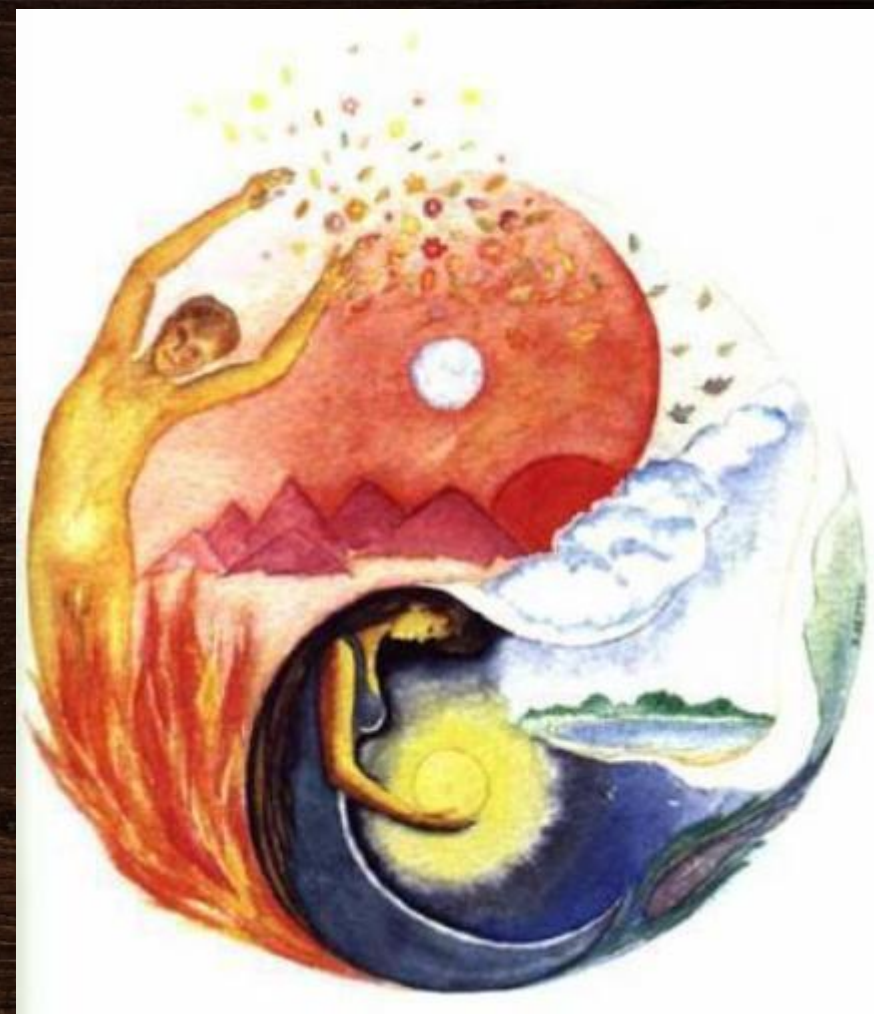
Dualisms:

- Dualisms in Patriarchal society have created hierarchical divisions.
- E.g, Women/Nature & Men/Culture.
- Holds one unit as more valued: women below men, society above nature.
- Used to justify oppression of 'passive' women and nature: "nature cast in the female gender." (Merchant, 2006)
- "A gendered reason/nature contrast" (Plumwood in Hawkins, 1998)
- Important to confront dualisms to subvert women's experiences of Patriarchal society.
- Awareness of ourselves as biological beings could help to reconstruct our social reality and undo these destructive relationships. (Hawkins, 1998)

Subverting Dualisms:

Feminist Spirituality

- Earth-based.
- Celebrates the spiritual nature of the physical world and women's bodies.
- Provides a female image of 'religion'.
- Integral to Feminism as addresses four main issues; the image and language of God as male, detachment of body from soul, reclamation of women's spirituality and history, and to create a new theology and rituals based around women's spirituality. (Christ & Plaskow, Mellor, 1997)
- "will provide a basis for women's empowerment outside of patriarchal control." (Mellor, 1997)



Affinity Ecofeminism

Views women as having an “elemental connection to nature.”
(Mellor, 1997)

- Based in Feminist Spirituality.
- Often referred to as ‘Essentialism’.
- Not gender/power divisions that are the issue, but male domination or maleness itself that is “cause of ecological destruction and oppressive behavior.”
(Mellor, 1997)
- HOWEVER- is this another dualism?
- Mellor (1997): “women have found themselves subordinated” through this alliance.

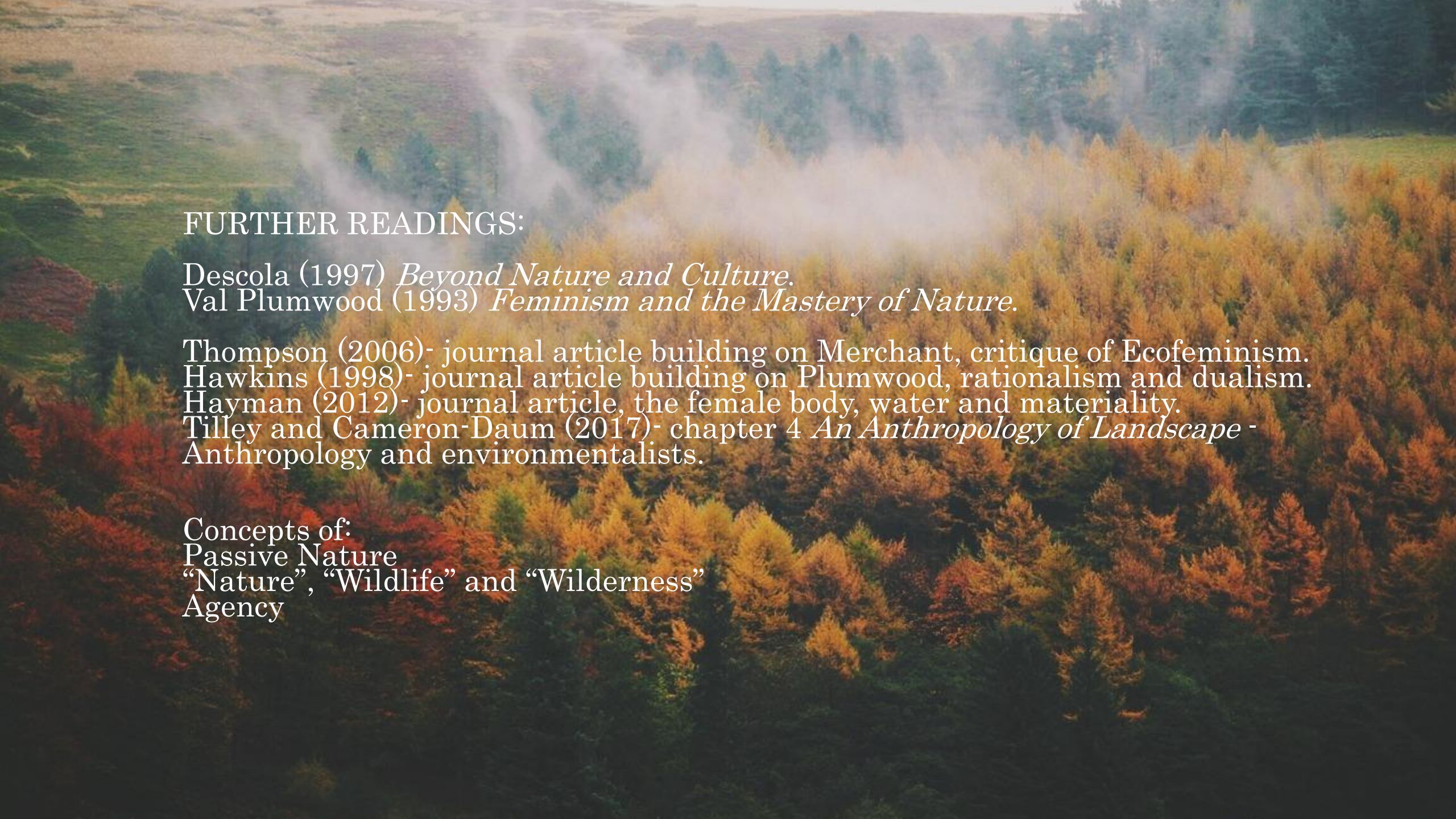
Social Constructivist

Views the assumed alliance between women and nature as constructed to serve the Patriarchal ideology.

- Affirmation of alliance reinforces the dualisms at the heart of gender oppression.
- “Defining woman as that which is mired in nature thrusts women outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality and agency.” (Stacy Alaimo in Seger, 2010)
- Emphasis must be put on the contextual and historical basis of this connection to nature.
- Whose interests does this connection serve?

Criticisms and defenses

- Essentialist view as counter-productive to Feminism and Ecofeminism, “biology is destiny” is what these movements were developed to counter. (Godfrey, 2014)
- Connection between woman and nature as biologically determined feeds into the Patriarchal ideology that determines value by gender/sex.
- The relationship between woman and nature is not dualistically splitting, rather a “vantage point for creating a different kind of culture.” (Ynestra King in Godfrey, 2014)
- Assumptions of this ‘duality’ as fixed and passive limit possibilities of the idea that it could set in motion the construction of “new kinds of communities.” (Downs, Godfrey, 2014)
- HOWEVER... Essentialism over-emphasises the categories of gender and generalises the experiences of women. (Gaard, 2011)

An aerial photograph of a vast forest landscape. The foreground and middle ground are filled with trees displaying vibrant autumn colors, including shades of yellow, orange, and red. In the background, a dense line of evergreen trees is visible, partially shrouded in a thick, white mist or fog that drifts across the valley. The overall scene is serene and atmospheric, with soft lighting suggesting an early morning or late afternoon setting.

FURTHER READINGS:

Descola (1997) *Beyond Nature and Culture*.

Val Plumwood (1993) *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

Thompson (2006)- journal article building on Merchant, critique of Ecofeminism.

Hawkins (1998)- journal article building on Plumwood, rationalism and dualism.

Hayman (2012)- journal article, the female body, water and materiality.

Tilley and Cameron-Daum (2017)- chapter 4 *An Anthropology of Landscape* -
Anthropology and environmentalists.

Concepts of:

Passive Nature

“Nature”, “Wildlife” and “Wilderness”

Agency

- MERCHANT, C. (2006) *THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION AND THE DEATH OF NATURE*. ISIS, VOL 7, NO 3. [PDF]
- MELLOR, M. (1997) *FEMINISM AND ECOLOGY*. NEW YORK: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS.
- GODFREY, P. (2014) *DIANE WILSON VS UNION CARBIDE: ECOFEMINISM AND THE ELITIST CHARGE OF ESSENTIALISM*. CNS JOURNAL. [PDF]
- GAARD, G. (2011) *ECOFEMINISM REVISITED: REJECTING ESSENTIALISM AND RE-PLACING SPECIES IN A MATERIAL FEMINIST ENVIRONMENTALISM*. [PDF]
- SEGER, M. (2010) *WOMEN IN NATURE, WOMEN IN CULTURE: ECOFEMINISM AND SIMONA VINCI'S AGOSTO NERO*. AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ITALIAN, VOL 87, NO 2. [PDF]
- THOMPSON, C. (2006) *BACK TO NATURE? RESURRECTING ECOFEMINISM AFTER POSTSTRUCTURALIST AND THIRD WAVE FEMINISMS*. ISIS, VOL 97, NO 3. [ONLINE] JSTOR
- HAWKINS, Z. (1998) *ECOFEMINISM AND NONHUMANS: CONTINUITY, DIFFERENCE, DUALISM, AND DOMINATION*. HYPATIA, VOL 13, NO 1. [ONLINE] JSTOR
- DESCOLA, P. (2013) *BEYOND NATURE AND CULTURE*. CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
- PLUMWOOD, V. (1993) *FEMINISM AND THE MASTERY OF NATURE*. NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE
- HAYMAN, E. (2012) *SHAPED BY THE IMAGINATION: MYTHS OF WATER, WOMEN, AND PURITY. RCC PERSPECTIVES*, NO 2. [ONLINE] JSTOR
- TILLEY, C. CAMERON-DAUM, K. *AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF LANDSCAPE: THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY*. LONDON: UCL PRESS. [ONLINE] JSTOR

References