

An Investigation into the Ecofeminist Theory;
The Innate Connection between Women and Nature.

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Introduction

'The rejection of nature and physicality carries with it the rejection of woman, whom [are] determined by nature and the body to a far greater extent than men.' (Dodson Gray quoted by Plumwood, 1986, p. 125).

This quote succinctly depicts the foundation for the Ecofeminist ideology; that women are innately connected to nature. This dissertation aims to provide evidence to contest this theory as essentialist. The understanding of the artwork of Ana Mendieta from an ecofeminist perspective intends to evoke reasons why ecofeminism can be considered essentialist.

First identified by French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in the 1970s, Ecofeminism was a movement which aimed to understand why women and nature experienced equal inferiority in society. Arguably, such oppression, evident within society, was concluded to be caused by a body of 'inherent, unchanging, biological characteristics' (Merchant 1996, p. 202) exclusive to women and nature. This innate connection is theorised both biologically and spiritually to explain why women and nature are equally discriminated against. Through an analysis of how ecofeminists execute the innate connection theory, this dissertation aims to weigh its validity as a philosophy.

Ecofeminist activism aims to prevent the exploitation of those subjected to hierarchal dominance to encourage fair treatment (Twine, 2001, p. 1). This hierarchical difference is visualised through Figure 1; the first image illustrates

society via a pyramid structure, with men as dominant at the top, followed by women and nature. Ecofeminism aims to advocate an equal assembly, considering the fair treatment of all life forms, as shown in the second image.

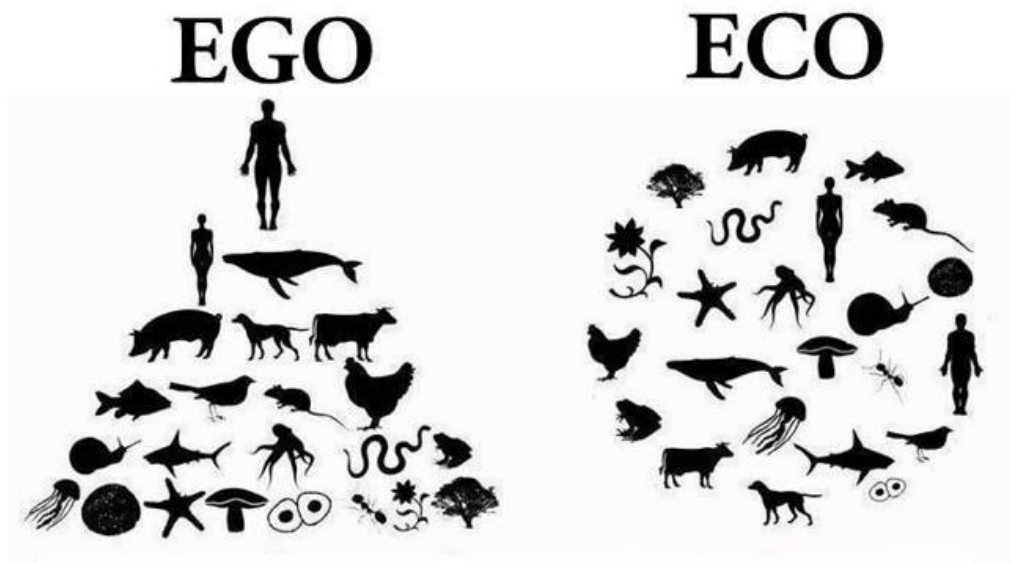


Figure 1: Fetherston, R. (2016) *Ecocentrism diagram*.

However, as demonstrated in Figure 1 the inferiority of women and nature as a result of their innate connection evidences limitations within ecofeminist theory. Figure 1 provides a commentary from a Western perspective. These theorists fail to include any reference to the position of women and nature outside of their location. Specifically, these theories do not account for Third World narratives; civilisations from Asia, Africa and Latin America which are underdeveloped and severely struck by poverty. The appropriation of one perspective of society can

encourage an essentialist critique, as problems in one location cannot be applied to another.

Defined by ecofeminist Carol Bigwood; the concept of essentialism is 'the use of any categories that tend towards universalisations and internal stability through insufficient attention to historical and/or cultural identity' (Bigwood 1993, p. 14). A reliance on western perspectives and an ignorance of diverse cultural and social differences within ecofeminism diverts the validity of the innate connection theory. Throughout the dissertation, the criticisms of ecofeminism will be considered, evidencing how the theory of innate connection is essentialist.

An ecofeminist framework has been associated with the art of Ana Mendieta. Born of Cuban descent and exiled to the United States; Iowa, at the age of 12 (Viso 2004, p.39), Mendieta's artwork displays connotations of gender and identity, through the location of her body within the natural landscape. It is through execution of these themes that Mendieta has been understood through an ecofeminist perspective. Her artwork has been considered a reflection of the innate connection between women and nature. This dissertation aims to discuss how and why her artwork evokes ideas of ecofeminism.

Furthermore, I intend to argue that Mendieta's work is mistakenly appropriated to an Ecofeminist framework; this can be recognised through a

misunderstanding of her key themes. In particular are the influences from Santeria; an Afro-Cuban religion which originated from the slave trade in Cuba (BBC, 2004). Such important themes of her Latin identity and heritage are often disregarded due to an ecofeminist perspective of her practice. This dissertation will undertake a visual analysis of these cultural contexts to understand why her art is wrongly associated to ecofeminism and critiqued as essentialist.

To understand the appropriation of Ana Mendieta's practice to an ecofeminist framework, the arguments supporting and refuting the theory of the innate connection between women and nature need to be considered. Chapter One aims to demonstrate the reasons for this theory, considering biological, spiritual, social and environmental factors. An introduction into the criticism of essentialism will highlight the flaws within ecofeminist theory. To reveal the ecofeminist claim that all women share an innate connection to nature is essentialist.

Chapter Two will incorporate the arguments proposed in Chapter One to consider why Ana Mendieta's practice is often understood through an ecofeminist framework. A visual analysis will be conducted to identify how the theories of ecofeminism are presented within the artworks aesthetic. This observation aims to expose how the misinterpretation of Mendieta's personal influences mistakenly encourages an ecofeminist perspective. To conclude, Chapter Three aims to show how this misunderstanding has encouraged an

essentialist critique of her work. In turn, this hopes to reveal the theory of the innate connection between women and nature as an essentialist theory.

Chapter One: Theories of Ecofeminism and Essentialist Critique.

This chapter aims to explore, in depth, the main components of ecofeminism in relation to the innate connection between women and nature. By analysing the validity of these theories I hope to reveal the essentialist criticisms of the innate connection theory within ecofeminism.

The work of artist Ana Mendieta, which will be explored within Chapter Two, is often visually analysed via ecofeminist theory. Ecofeminism is frequently accused of essentialism due to a reliance on the Western ideals of the female. Theorist Richard Twine identifies that the universalisation of woman is repeatedly deemed essentialist, as not all women share the same experiences with nature (Twine, 2001, pp. 1, 11). Through a Western lens, the personal depth of Mendieta's artwork is somewhat lost and misunderstood as a visual representation of the universal female image. Firstly, to understand the reasoning for this misinterpretation I intend to undertake an analysis of ecofeminist theory and essentialism. This aims to display how Mendieta's work is not a reflection of ecofeminist ideology nor essentialism.

1.1 The theory of the innate connection between women and nature in relation to biology.

The theory that women share a connection with nature is central to ecofeminist ideology. By locating exclusive similarities between female and natural fertility,

ecofeminists aim to show this connection as innate. This claim is evident through the theories of Val Plumwood, Elizabeth Dodson Gray and Richard Twine. They argue that women are determined by nature and the body to a far greater extent than men. Because of the reproductive cycle it is much harder for women to escape a sense of connection to the natural world (Twine, 2001, p. 11 and Dodson Gray and Plumwood, 1986, p. 125). These physiological experiences of reproduction demonstrate an occurrence where mind cannot override nature and the body dominates. The inability to control these reproductive traits represent how women do share unavoidable, exclusive experiences with nature. Therefore the ideas proposed by Twine, Dodson Gray and Plumwood are agreeable. To an extent this demonstrates that women can share an innate connection to nature.

The ability to reproduce and create life as a symbol for the connection between women and nature is regularly subjected to essentialist criticism. The reliance on the reproductive traits of the female body raises ethical questions: do those women who cannot or choose not to reproduce share this innate connection to nature? Such a question has been considered by theorists Carol Bigwood and Ariel Salleh, to highlight an essentialist element of this theory. They argue that the theory relies on a 'universal, ahistorical' representation of the feminine principle on the biological grounds of 'woman' (Salleh quoted by Bigwood 1993, p. 16). Consequently, they suggest that the theory of the innate connection presents a generalised image of women. It ignores the ethics of choice and the reproductive abilities of individuals. Therefore, the innate connection theory

cannot be a representative of all women. It is because of this universalisation that the theory can be claimed to be essentialist.

Furthermore, the theory of innate connection between women and nature can be criticised as essentialist through the inconsideration of cultural and social differences. The theory that proposes that all women intend to reproduce ignores religious, cultural and social specifics of the individual. It has been argued by theorists such as Plumwood that the reluctance to consider individualistic experiences causes generalisation (Plumwood, 1986, p. 125). This contributes to the essentialist critique of the innate connection theory as it presents women only as fertile bodies. This universalisation of women somewhat reinforces gender stereotypes, particularly in regards to Western perspectives. The theory of innate connection proposed by Twine and Dodson Gray is based only on a western concept of reproduction. It is this ignorance of global differences within the theory that proves it is essentialist, as it does not consider other attitudes towards reproduction.

1.2 The theory of the innate connection between women and nature in relation to spiritualism.

A more spiritually orientated interpretation has been argued to evidence the innate connection between women and nature. With consideration to mysticism, ecofeminists aim to show validity in this theory, whilst attempting to avoid essentialist criticisms. Bigwood claims that the changes of the moon can also

determine a woman's reproductive cycle (Bigwood 1993, p. 135). When contextually analysed the reliance on mystic concepts such as lunar movements have contributed to women's connection to nature. Particularly within ancient cultures, the reliance on lunar concepts have been contemplated to determine the fertility of both women and nature (Bigwood 1993, p. 251). To an extent ecofeminists evidence that women can be spiritually connected to nature. It is through these ancient beliefs that there remains some validity in this theory.

To a certain degree the use of goddess iconography also aims to show how women are innately connected to nature. Through the reliance on ancient historical contexts ecofeminists such as Carolyn Merchant identify the importance of the 'Earth Goddess' (Merchant 1996, p. 10) for ecofeminist ideology. Through the feminisation of the earth, these ancient symbols perhaps represent the shared fertility in women and nature. The association of women to female deities through these fertile similarities could create a spiritual connection to nature. Identified by Merchant and Bigwood, the comparison of women to spiritual symbols represents the nurturing abilities of women (Merchant 1996, p. 10). To an extent the reliance on female deities represent the inherent mothering capabilities of women. This could indicate how women are in fact spiritually connected to nature.

On the contrary, the spiritual connection between women and nature has been accused of essentialism. The generalisation of women involved in the arguments proposed previously by Bigwood and Merchant evidence this.

Identified by theorists Janet Biehl and Douglas Buege, the theory that compares women and nature to the 'archetype of Earth Mother' (Biehl quoted by Buege 1994, p. 48) creates the image of a universal woman. The spiritual interpretation of the innate connection implies all women share a relationship to these religious symbols. This generalisation contributes to the essentialist criticism of this theory, as I argue that not all women share an innate connection to nature.

Furthermore, reluctance to consider the cultural and social differences within the spiritual theory of the innate connection may explain why it is deemed essentialist. The ignorance of different religious beliefs in regard to fertility, lunar movements and deities deems the theory simplistic. The lack understanding encourages a universal image of femininity. It is due to these narrow perspectives of nature and women that cause an essentialist understanding. Therefore I agree with theorists Biehl and Buege that the innate connection theory is essentialist as it cannot relate to all women.

1.3 The innate connection theory in relation to dualistic thought.

The innate connection of women and nature has been related to the ecofeminist theory of dualism. It is through dualist theory that ecofeminists aim to validate the claim that women share an innate connection to nature. The paradigm of dualisms, proposed by theorist Plumwood, is demonstrated by the diagram (see Figure 2).

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Reason/ Nature | Reason/ Madness (unreason) |
| Culture/ Nature | Mental/ Manual |
| Mind/ Body | Urban (city)/ Rural (countryside) |
| Male/ Female | Civilised/ Primitive |
| Masculine/ Feminine | Self/ Other |
| Human/ Animal | Active/ Passive |
| Reason/ Emotion | Production/ Reproduction |
| Subject/ Object | Order/ Disorder |
| Public/ Private | Heterosexual/ Queer |
| Adult/ Child | Master/ Slave |
| Universal/ Particular | Theory/ Practice |
| Freedom/ Nature | Reason/ Matter (physicality) |
| Reason/ the Erotic | White/ Non-White |

Table 1 – Intersecting Western dualisms.
Adapted from Plumwood (1993) and Gaard (1997).

Figure 2: Twine, R. (2001) *Intersecting Western Dualisms*.

A dichotomy of superiority/ inferiority is presented by the diagram to explain dualist theory. Men are perceived as the dominating symbol, associated with the same superiority as mind and culture. Women are categorized as inferior with body and nature. By connecting the categories of women, nature and body, Plumwood aims to show the innate connection women share with nature. The

dualistic theory aims to reflect the hierarchal construct of western society. The innate connection can be recognised through the diagram to encourage inferiority towards women and nature as one classification. By identifying the innate connection as the cause of discrimination, it somewhat validates the theory.

To a certain degree the understanding of dualism by theorists validates the claim that women share an innate connection to nature. Theorist Noël Sturgeon comments that 'this dualistic and hierarchal way of thinking has justified and promoted the exploitation of both women and nature' (Sturgeon, 1999, p. 261). By this Sturgeon conveys through the construct of dualisms that women and nature are equally oppressed within society due to their innate connection. This is further agreed by Plumwood and Buege who argue that 'difference is not automatically inferiority'. (Plumwood quoted by Buege 1994, p. 52). Women sharing an innate connection to nature should not cause oppression as shown in Figure 2, as primitively there is no hierarchy. It is only due to social structures that women and nature are exploited in this way. Although discriminated, their equal domination perhaps validates the claim that women are connected to nature, which is evident through this dualism.

However, it can be argued that essentialist criticism can be identified within the dualistic theory in relation to innate connection theory. Dualistic theory is a patriarchal construct which deems it to be essentialist. Author Janis Birkeland

evidences this view by arguing that the structure of dichotomies are founded on the concept of the 'rational man' through patriarchal beliefs. She further states that women can adapt to cultural difference and be 'rational' whilst having this innate connection with nature (Birkeland quoted by Merchant 1996 p. 202).

Birkeland demonstrates the dualistic theory's reliance on Western perspectives, particularly gender stereotypes. I can argue that the cause of equal domination for women and nature is not due to their innate connection, but stems from the patriarchal concept of gender roles. By generalising all civilisations to this construct of Western society, it ignores individual specificities and is therefore essentialist.

Nonetheless, a reliance on gender stereotypes within dualistic theory demonstrates an ignorance to cultural and social specifics. It is due to this western perspective which deems the theory essentialist. The association of all civilisations to this construct of social dichotomy generalises all women to be as equally oppressed as nature. Such an approach may only relate to some women in a particular society, rather than on a global scale. I can therefore argue that the consideration of cultural details needs to be accounted for in order to propose a plausible reason why the connection between women and nature causes inferiority. To an extent it deems both the theory of the innate connection and dualism as essentialist.

1.4 The innate connection theory in relation to environmental concern.

The innate connection women share with nature can be evidenced through environmental destruction. It is insinuated that environmental disruption may be a result of the association women have with nature. Sturgeon supports this by stating that 'there is a basic agreement that the patriarchal Western conceptualization of nature as a feminized, exploitative resource has had negative environmental consequences' (Sturgeon, 1999, p. 261). By this response, Sturgeon suggests that through the innate connection theory women and nature are presented as inferior. It is the feminization of the earth which has led to its destruction. It could be implied that if there were no innate connection, nature would not be misused or disrupted. It is only through the association with women that encourages oppression of nature. Therefore, through evidence of environmental disruption it can be claimed that women share an innate connection to nature.

To an extent this innate connection to nature encourages a deeper empathy to environmental concerns. It is this female association with nature that leads to a deeper understanding, perhaps reinforcing the theory that they share an inherent connection. Such an interpretation is suggested by ecofeminist Greta Gaard, who states that 'women tend to consider the net effect of ethical decisions on all people involved' (Gaard 1993, p. 238). Gaard indicates that women's greater empathetic approach to natural devastation is caused by their innate connection. Therefore she somewhat validates the theory that women

share an innate connection to nature, as without it they would not be as sensitive to the effects of environmental disruption.

However, the ideas that propose all women share an empathy to natural destruction because of their innate connection, indicates essentialist ideas. This is understood by theorist Maria Mies who identifies that 'not only women in the industrialized countries realized the interconnectedness of all life forms in their struggle against environmental destruction' (Mies quoted by Sturgeon, 1999, p. 267). By claiming that there is cultural dependency on this matter, Mies locates the difficulty in associating a general female concern for environmental destruction. The same Western perspective cannot be applied to all civilisations. In particular are those in Third World countries, where the effects of environmental disruption impact societies far more severely. Therefore the argument that all women share an empathetic response to environmental destruction is debateable. This also questions whether all women share an innate connection to nature. It is the simplistic analysis that generalises all civilisations to a Western perspective that proves these theories as essentialist.

1.5 Chapter conclusion

Overall, the theory of innate connection can be considered an important concept for the ecofeminist movement. Depicted as an inescapable trait for women, the bond with nature is inherent through similarities in fertility cycles.

Evidenced through ancient history, the connection of femininity and nature is also symbolised through goddess iconography.

Arguably I feel the biological approach, rather than the spiritual theory is more reliable in providing evidence for the innate connection theory. The use of scientific evidence somewhat shows that women share an innate connection to nature, as it is unavoidable biologically. Although it is a recognised factor I argue it displays essentialist ideals. The focus on women as solely reproductive and fertile beings enforces westernised gender stereotypes. It avoids explicit issues regarding choice and ability to reproduce. The theory categorises all women under a Western perspective creating a generic image of fertility, resulting in an essentialist concept. Therefore it is true that SOME women innately share a connection to nature, yet this cannot account for ALL women.

It is through the westernised view of global civilisations that I show ecofeminist ideologies as essentialist. It is understood by theorists such as Twine that cultural and social differences need to be accounted for in order to validate the theory of the innate connection (Twine, 2001, pp. 1, 11). This avoids essentialism as individualistic viewpoints are considered. Ecofeminists such as Warren understand that the movement is a 'theory in progress' (Warren quoted by Buege 1994, p. 55). It is clear that development of theories is necessary to avoid associating the western perspective universally and to prevent essentialist criticism.

Chapter Two: Ana Mendieta and the Relationship between Women and Nature in relation to Ecofeminism.

The following chapter aims to explore the innate connection women share with nature in the work of Ana Mendieta. By applying her work to ecofeminist theory, a visual analysis hopes to reflect the arguments stated in Chapter One. The ideas proposed by ecofeminists regarding the innate connection have been understood through four categorisations. Biologically, the innate connection is demonstrated through reproduction and fertility. Spiritually, it is represented through the celebration of goddess iconography. Socially, the innate connection is conveyed through oppressive dualistic structures within society.

Environmentally, it is shown through women's empathy toward natural devastation. Though this chapter I hope to explicitly evidence how and why Mendieta's work is understood through these theories, locating her work within the ecofeminist framework.

The interpretation of Ana Mendieta's practice is often used as a visual representative for ecofeminist thought. Her exploration into the relationship with nature began both before and after the rise of ecofeminist ideology. Identified by art critic Julia Bryan-Wilson; Mendieta was one of many female artists 'seriously grappling with this subject' (Bryan-Wilson 2013, p. 31) in the context of U.S society in the 1970s-80s. To understand why her work is considered

ecofeminist, a visual analysis of her performances *Imagen de Yagul* and *Untitled 1974* will be undertaken in this chapter (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3: Mendieta, Ana. (1973) *Imagen de Yagul*. [colour photograph, 48.3 x 31.8 cm]. At: Genstone Museum: Maryland



Figure 4: Mendieta, Ana. (1974) *Untitled (Silueta Series Mexico)*. [colour photograph, 25.4 x 20.3 cm] At: American Patrons of Tate: London

Firstly, an analysis of her work regarding the biological approach to the innate connection of nature and women will be conducted. This will then be compared to a spiritual evaluation, evidencing how Mendieta's practice alludes to different interpretations of the innate connection theory. Social and cultural ideas will then be applied to contextualise her artwork. Finally, an investigation into environmental concerns will be conducted, to understand the importance of her materials. Furthermore, the execution of visual analysis aims to reveal the reasoning for the ecofeminist connotations within her work, arguing that they are unintentional.

2.1 The innate connection in relation to biology within Ana Mendieta's practice.

The theory of innate connection, specifically the role of biological characteristics, is recognised in the artwork of Ana Mendieta. The significance of fertility within this theory can be identified in Mendieta's first *Siluetas*; *Imagen de Yagul*, (see Figure 3). Documented through photography, this image depicts Mendieta lying naked within a Zatopec tomb covered in white flowers. Through the vegetation protruding from the pubic area, art critic Anne Creissels identifies connotations of reproduction and fertility, implying the female body becomes 'literally fertile' (Creissels 2007, p. 183). Through the merging of female and natural fertility symbols, Mendieta presents women and nature as one

reproductive entity. This imagery of shared reproductive traits clearly demonstrates the innate connection of women and nature.

The depiction of fertility as evidence for the theory of innate connection affirms the arguments of ecofeminists in Chapter One. The intertwining of the female reproductive system and natural growth, portrayed by Figure 3, displays exclusive similarities between women and nature. This imitates the claims made by Plumwood, that the innate connection is exclusive to women as 'there is no natural biological comparable experience for men' (Plumwood, 1986, p. 125). Such a concept is evident through Figure 3, as these exclusive physiological experiences are expressed through the growth of new life. Through this symbolism Mendieta reaffirms ecofeminist themes by expressing the important connection of female and natural fertility.

The innate connection of women and nature in relation to biology can be recognised further through an interpretation of natural materials. The colour photograph documentation of *Untitled 1974* (see Figure 4) depicts the bloody outline of Mendieta's body against a white sandy background, emphasising the deep colour of red. Author Melissa Meyer has suggested that the blood could allude to the menstrual cycle, a pigment which symbolises female fertility (Meyer 2005, p. 48). Furthermore, with the absence of herself within this piece it perhaps emphasises the importance of body, indicated by her outline, as her mind is not present. This could be a comment on her inability to control the

natural bodily occurrences such as menstruation. Through Figure 3 Mendieta is able to express a connection with nature through the uncontrollable quality of fertility.

The symbolism of blood to evoke fertility echoes the arguments proposed by Twine, Plumwood and Dodson Gray in Chapter One. They argue that the reproductive traits involved in the menstrual cycle represent a connection to nature, as portrayed by Mendieta's strong use of contrasting pigments. They go on to argue that such natural occurrences cannot be controlled by women, which can be demonstrated by Mendieta's absence in the performance. By reflecting the ideas proposed by ecofeminists; that the connection is innate and inescapable, it suggests why Mendieta's work is understood via an ecofeminist perspective.

2.2 The innate connection in relation to spirituality within Ana Mendieta's practice.

The innate spiritual connection between women and nature is expressed through location in Figure 3. With an understanding of the land as a nurturing organism, Mendieta evokes ideas regarding goddess iconography. These concepts present similarities to ecofeminist spiritualism, suggested in Chapter One.

Through location Mendieta identifies the importance of the earth as a mother figure, echoing the ecofeminist theory of the innate connection. This context is illustrated by Figure 3. The work was located in the ruins of the 'Labyrinth' in the Palace of the Six Patios at Yagul, an archaeological site in the valley of Oaxaca, Mexico, 1974 (Tate, 2010). Performed by Mendieta, she places herself within the tomb to represent 'the after image of being encompassed within the womb' (Mendieta quoted by Tate, 2010.). She indicates how nature continues to nurture humanity after the trauma of being 'cast from the womb' (Mendieta quoted by Viso 2004, p. 42). To present earth as a mothering figure she enlightens similarities between exclusive female and natural nurturing experiences. Through location, the work visualises the theory of spiritual innate connection.

The spiritual portrayal of the earth as a mother encourages a contextual analysis of Figure 3, to suggest the theory of the innate connection. The earth as a maternal source has been understood symbolically for indigenous people. Influenced by the Afro Cuban culture Santeria, Mendieta provides historical depth to her works. Mendieta presents how the earth was central to Santeria worship, as demonstrated by the 'Earth Mother' goddess Yemaya, a provider and nurturer of life (Duncan, n.d). These references to goddess iconography are depicted by Figure 3. Mendieta presents herself dependent on her location; the earth, which has been interpreted as the womb of the Earth Mother. By this Mendieta portrays the significance of spirituality, perhaps to insinuate that women share an innate bond with nature.

Furthermore, by considering goddess iconography's significance within primitive cultures, Mendieta imitates the ideas surrounding the theory of innate connection. Figure 3 evokes claims made by Merchant; that the earth was considered strictly female within early 'Christian' 'Greek' and 'pagan philosophies' (Merchant 1996, p. 78). Through Yemaya, Mendieta portrays the earth as feminized, somewhat relating to Merchants argument regarding primitive cultures. The ecofeminist celebration of women as nurturers aims to present women as sharing a deeper connection with nature (Merchant 1996, p. 171). This representation is evident through Figure 3 as Mendieta depicts the importance of the spiritual connection for indigenous culture. It can be argued that Mendieta's methodology shares similarities to the ideas within ecofeminist theory, explaining why she is frequently understood within this framework.

The spiritual connection of women to nature can be identified further through Mendieta's use of blood. The bright red pigment used within Figure 4 has been suggested to allude to the rituals surrounding Santeria culture. Creissels identifies the use of real animal blood within this piece (Creissels 2007, p. 182). The animal blood could symbolise sacrifice, a main tradition within Santeria rituals. Depicted within the artwork; Mendieta purposely associates women as the givers of new life, as sacrifice must be made in order to ensure survival. Traditionally, sacrifice within Santeria culture was exclusive to male animals (BBC, 2004). In choosing to include imagery of herself, a female form, she

deliberately comments on the relationship of women and nature. It is therefore insinuated that Mendieta's use of materials contribute to the spiritual interpretation of her work, which follows the innate connection theory.

Mendieta displays the innate connection between women and nature through blood symbolism, reflecting the spiritual ideas suggested by ecofeminists. Ecofeminist Bigwood conveys the connection of women to nature by referencing the celebration of new life within primitive religions. (Bigwood 1993, p. 251). Mendieta's use of blood evokes connotations of new life through the context of Santeria rituals. Although both theories demonstrate the significance of primitive people, Bigwood's theory relies heavily on ideas involving lunar movements to determine the menstrual cycle. Although a fertility symbol, Bigwood's argument cannot be interpreted in the same way, as there is no visual to suggest Mendieta was influenced by lunar movements. By comparing her artwork to ecofeminist ideology it is evident that indigenous cultures are significant in portraying the innate connection between women and nature. However, it is clear that not all of Mendieta's influences or ideas can be related to an ecofeminist framework.

The arguments regarding fertility in Mendieta's work are located within an ecofeminist framework to show both a spiritual and biological innate connection to nature. The different approaches by critics in understanding Mendieta's work provides depth, whilst questioning the validity of opposing interpretations. It can

be claimed her commentary regarding spiritualism in Figure 3 provides evidence of her intentions. Mendieta states that 'it is this sense of magic, knowledge and power that primitive art has that has influenced my personal attitude to art-making' (Mendieta quoted by Rosenthal 2013, p. 11) Mendieta locates the significance of Santeria beliefs within the making of her artwork. Through this acknowledgement of Mendieta's personal intentions it is clear she has been influenced by a spiritual connection to nature.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the biological themes identified within her practice ignore Mendieta's actual intentions. It is through this reading of an ecofeminist perspective that ideas reflecting ecofeminist theories are found in her work. The biological approaches evidencing the innate connections to nature may have not been intended by Mendieta as she appears more concerned with spirituality. This could suggest that her work encourages misinterpretations due to the association with an ecofeminist framework, hindering her true personal intentions.

2.3 Dualistic thought in relation to innate connection within the work of Ana Mendieta

The relationship between ecofeminist theories of the innate connection between women and nature and dualist thought can be identified in the work of Ana Mendieta. Through the indigenous tribes portrayed by ancient sites in Figure 3,

Mendieta depicts historical social structures. This comparison is explained by curator Olga Viso. She claims that the work represents 'a time that ostensibly preceded identifications of difference based on nationality, ideology, race and ethnicity' (Viso 2004, p. 35). Demonstrated by Figure 3, Mendieta utilizes ancient tombs to portray a period where hierarchical structures in society had only begun to develop. It is through acknowledgement of these primitive cultures that suggest the association of women and nature as inferior may not have been established. It is through her study of indigenous cultures that Mendieta perhaps discovers a period of equality for women and nature.

In relation to ecofeminist theory, Mendieta's work could imply that it is the development of attitudes in society that encourage dualistic structures. Her artwork (see Figures 3 and 4) depicts, through location, a period when the inherent connection between women and nature was not considered inferior. It is only through a progression into the dualistic thinking seen in contemporary society that oppresses both women and nature. Therefore, through the locational consideration of her artwork, Mendieta presents how the innate connection need not be evidenced by the oppression of women and nature. Nonetheless, without consideration to dualisms, Mendieta's work cannot be fully associated to an ecofeminist framework.

However, although I can argue Mendieta does not reflect the dualistic ideas of ecofeminist theory, this can be refuted by theorists such as Creissels. Creissels

identifies dualisms in Figures 3 and 4 through use of 'female specificity' (Creissels 2007, p. 183). Creissels argues that Mendieta's use of the female form classifies the 'difference between man and woman' (Creissels 2007, p. 183). To some extent this difference contributes to a dualism through an 'opposition of sexes' (Creissels 2007, p. 183). It is through Mendieta's depiction of the female that automatically creates a separation of gender. Perhaps without intention, Mendieta forms a divide through identification of gender difference, adhering to dualistic structures. It is therefore contested that Mendieta follows both the theory of innate connection and dualism, revealing why her work is understood through an ecofeminist perspective.

2.4 Environmental concerns in relation to the innate connection within the work of Ana Mendieta.

The ecofeminist concern for environmental devastation demonstrates a deeper empathy to nature for women. Mendieta's approaches to the earth, demonstrated by Figures 3 and 4 are explored by artists such as Nancy Spero. Spero claims that Mendieta 'sought intimate, recessed spaces, protective habitats' (Spero quoted by Herzberg 2004, p. 194). By this Spero perhaps implies that Mendieta's use of space aims not to disrespect the land. It may be due to this innate connection that encourages this empathy towards nature's wellbeing. By manifesting the environmental concerns of ecofeminist ideology, it is clear why her work is understood through an ecofeminist framework.

In relation to ecofeminist concerns, it can be argued that Mendieta displays an empathy toward nature, evoking the innate connection theory. This can be recognised through comparing techniques used by male land artists. Robert Smithson is an example, critiqued by Viso, she claims that he ‘brutalised’ nature ‘in a male way’ (Viso 2004, p. 68). Such disruption can be recognised through harmful materials such as asphalt and concrete, used within *Asphalt Rundown* (see Figure 5).

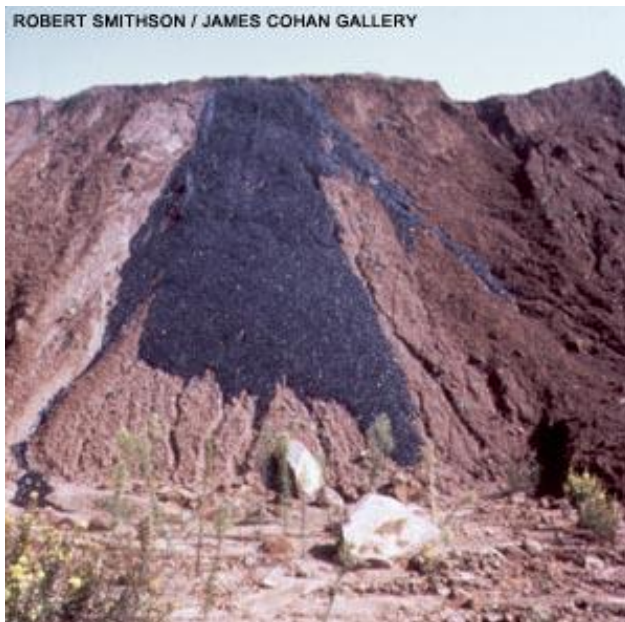


Figure 5: Smithson, Robert. (1969) *Asphalt Rundown*. [13 minute film] At: James Cohan Gallery: Manhattan.

Artistic director Stephanie Rosenthal claims that Smithson’s use of materials caused environmental harm and contributed to global warming (Rosenthal 2013, p. 13). This contrasts to Mendieta’s practice, which aims to prevent

interference with nature. Through comparison of artistic approaches, it is clear why Mendieta is often understood through an ecofeminist framework.

A deeper empathy to nature, implied through Mendieta's artworks relates to the claims made by ecofeminists; Sturgeon and Gaard in Chapter One. They argue that the deeper understanding of environmental devastation for women has been caused by this innate connection. When comparing the approaches to earth from a female and male perspective, the artworks communicate this concept. Through an ecofeminist framework, it is Mendieta's empathetic response to environmental concerns that evidences the innate connection.

On the contrary, this comparison of artists based on gender differences can be contradicted. By comparing Mendieta to artist Richard Long, it can be suggested that an empathy to nature is not exclusive to women and is therefore not a result of their innate connection. Viso identifies the work of Long as an inspiration to Mendieta, through his respectful approaches to nature (Viso 2004, p. 68). This can be recognised in *A Line Made by Walking* (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Long, Richard. (1967) *A Line Made By Walking*. [Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper and graphite on board. 375 x 324 mm]. At: Tate: London

Long creates ephemeral artwork documenting physical experiences, which have no destructive permanence on the land. His artwork displays less aggressive techniques to nature, reflecting 'humanity's relationship to the earth' (Viso 2004, p. 68). The comparison of approaches by Mendieta and Long contests the idea that empathy towards nature is exclusive to women. Therefore Mendieta cannot solely be understood from an ecofeminist perspective.

The empathetic relationship both artists share with nature perhaps perceives that Mendieta does not follow an ecofeminist ideology. The arguments proposed by Gaard and Sturgeon in Chapter One claims that women share a deeper understanding to natural destruction than men. Art critic Julia Herzberg identifies that both Mendieta and Long have an 'intimate relationship to the earth' through respecting their materials (Herzberg 2004, p. 172). Whilst Mendieta's work may share connotations that suggest women have an innate connection to nature. I can argue that her respect for nature cannot be used as evidence to dictate this, as it is not exclusive to just female artists. Therefore Mendieta does not fully relate to an ecofeminist framework.

2.5 Chapter Conclusion.

To a certain degree it could be claimed that the work of Mendieta reflects the innate connection women share with nature through an ecofeminist framework. The analysis of Figures 3 and 4 heavily relate to the theories proposed by ecofeminists in Chapter One. Through comparing her visuals to these theories it is clear why her artwork is applied to an ecofeminist framework.

However, although Mendieta's work strongly represents the innate connection between women and nature through an ecofeminist perspective, theorist Judith Bryan-Wilson argues that it fails to visualise all ecofeminist concerns (Bryan-

Wilson 2013, p. 33). Acknowledgement of personal intentions need to be considered in order to fully analyse Mendieta's understanding of the innate connection. I argue that the almost contradictory interpretations of spiritual and biological connotations, question Mendieta's actual intentions. With an in-depth commentary regarding personal and mystic concepts, perhaps the spiritual interpretation has more validity. Therefore suggesting that her work has been misinterpreted in an attempt to make it adhere to ecofeminist ideology.

I can argue that the interpretation of Mendieta's artwork to reflect ecofeminist concerns may have been misplaced. This view is reasoned by Bryan-Wilson who claims ecofeminism 'was only preliminarily beginning to circulate in her lifetime' (Bryan-Wilson 2013, p. 33). This questions whether Mendieta's intentions are to represent the ecofeminist perspective of the innate connection. Further analysis of Mendieta's practice to an ecofeminist framework will be conducted in the following chapter through essentialist critique. I intend to show that Mendieta's practice is a personal interpretation of the innate connection between women and nature rather than an ecofeminist one.

Chapter Three: Essentialist criticism in the work of Ana Mendieta in relation to Ecofeminist Theory.

This chapter aims to investigate the cause of essentialist critique and the association of an ecofeminist framework to Ana Mendieta's practice. Mendieta's interpretation of the innate connection between women and nature is often simplified to portray a universal image of woman. It is acknowledged that the afflicted ecofeminist perspectives recognised within Figures 3 and 4 have resulted in an unreliable analysis. Through an exploration of Mendieta's personal intentions, I will attempt to show how her work is misinterpreted as ecofeminist.

Mendieta's symbolism of the innate connection between women and nature is often subjected to essentialism. The essentialist critique implies that all women share a connection with nature, a generalised perspective which ignores individual religious, social and cultural experiences. Such a critique has been appropriated to her practice due to a misinterpretation that labels Mendieta as ecofeminist. Theorists Karina Bidaseca and Jane Blocker argue that this misinterpretation of Mendieta's aesthetic was triggered by the debates surrounding essentialism and anti-essentialism within the 1970s. (Bidaseca 2015, p. 228 and Blocker 1999. p. 30). It is perhaps due to this rise in

essentialist ideas, associated with ecofeminist ideology that her work has been critiqued in this way.

In order to reveal the cause of Mendieta's correspondence with ecofeminist theory and essentialist critique, it is important to understand her personal intentions. This will firstly be visually analysed through Figures 3 and 4 to reveal her biological connection to nature. The innate connection will then be reviewed spiritually to show the importance of religious beliefs in Mendieta's work. An investigation into the hierarchical construct of dualism within 1970s and '80s U.S society will then be undertaken to reveal racial and cultural discrimination, and how this impacted her practice. Finally an understanding of Third World narratives will be considered to examine why Mendieta evokes such an empathetic response to environmental concerns.

Collectively, visual analysis aims to argue that Mendieta's portrayal of the innate connection between women and nature is in fact personal. I intend to reveal how her association to ecofeminism is misinformed and it is only because of this that her work is critiqued as essentialist.

3.1 Essentialist criticism of the biological theory of innate connection within the work of Ana Mendieta.

The innate connection between women and nature, in relation to biology, is often criticised as essentialist in the artwork of Ana Mendieta. Demonstrated

within Chapter Two, her exploration into the similarities of fertility between women and nature portrays a biological correspondence. This comparison, depicted by Figure 3, presents a feminisation of space, which alludes to essentialist connotations. This analysis is explored by scholar Irit Rogoff, who describes Figure 3 as 'unbounded female sexuality' explored through 'wild appetites' (Rogoff quoted by Viso 2004, p. 25). These comments indicate that Mendieta's approach to the biological relationship between women and nature is uncoordinated and risks the generalisation of all women as fertile bodies. To associate all women as experiencing the same fertile connection to nature encourages an essentialist criticism to the work.

The suggested reliance on a universal ideal of female fertility portrayed by Figure 3 imitates the essentialist criticisms proposed by theorists such as Plumwood and Sturgeon in Chapter One. Plumwood argues that such a reliance can 'distort women's lives and destroy their capacity for choice'. (Plumwood, 1994, p. 35). In relation to the work of Mendieta, she somewhat adheres to this critique through her aesthetic representation of fertility. Through the portrayal of the white flowers protruding from the genital area, Mendieta emphasises the fertile abilities of women and nature. However, by associating all women to these generalised reproductive experiences, it ignores the capabilities and choices of the individual, and therefore presents an essentialist image. Therefore, it can be understood why Mendieta is mistakenly criticised as essentialist when her work is viewed in coherence to the framework of ecofeminism.

However, although Mendieta provides evidence to suggest essentialist ideas, it can be refuted that her work has been misinterpreted through an unintentional application to ecofeminism. The misunderstanding has been identified by Viso, who states Mendieta's works are 'personal responses to individual and collective memories' (Viso 2004, p. 65). Further analysis by Bryan-Wilson identifies that her work has been 'made to speak for quite distinct, even competing, feminisms' (Bryan-Wilson 2013, p. 28). It can be argued that her work does not intentionally aim to reflect ecofeminist ideology as an advocacy for all women. Rather, her art acts as a personal portrayal of the relationship between herself and nature. Therefore, her work shows a personal connection to nature and not a response to ecofeminist ideology, and thus avoids essentialist claims.

The ignorance of personal attributes regarding Mendieta's relationship to nature is often deemed essentialist, due to an ecofeminist perspective. Although previously analysed in Chapter Two to represent menstrual blood; a symbol of fertility, the use of red pigment within Figure 4 depicts a more personal allegory. Through further analysis author Danielle Knafo identifies that the symbolism of blood relates to the personal experiences of Mendieta's infancy. Mendieta, close to death, relied on blood transfusions from her father to survive (Knafo 2012, p. 181). It is due to these personal experiences, rather than the exclusively female symbol of reproduction, that Mendieta uses blood in her

work. Through consideration of personal contexts it is clear that Mendieta's work is often misinterpreted to illustrate ecofeminist theory. It is this misperception that obscures her own intentions for the artwork and encourages an essentialist critique.

3.2 Essentialist criticism in the spiritual theory of the innate connection within the work of Ana Mendieta.

The spiritual connection between women and nature is often criticised as essentialist, through an ecofeminist perspective this can be recognised in the artwork of Mendieta. Author Gloria Feman Orenstein has argued that the artist's depiction of herself in Figure 3, 'places Mendieta in a homogenising context in which all Goddess spirits are more or less equivalent' (Orenstein quoted by Bryan-Wilson 2013, p. 31). Orenstein may imply that with the depiction of herself rather than a specific goddess, Mendieta visualises that all women feel connected to one universal goddess of nature. This understanding of the spiritual connection of women and nature ignores individual experiences, creating a 'traditionalistic view of woman' (Merchant 1996, p. 8). When understood from this generalised ecofeminist perspective the artwork can be considered essentialist.

However, it is only through comparison to ecofeminist theory, regarding the spiritual innate connection that deems Mendieta's art as essentialist. Orenstein and Blocker argue that Mendieta's first use of the Santeria goddess Yemaya,

conveyed in Figure 3, coincided with a rise in goddess iconography from the white, middle-class feminist movements. (Orenstein quoted by Blocker 1999, p. 19). Mendieta's Santeria cultural influences were disregarded as her work was appropriated 'to a white goddess model' (Orenstein quoted by Blocker 1999, p. 19). It can be claimed that due to the feminist, most notably ecofeminist perspective of Mendieta's work, the Santeria contexts of goddess iconography are ignored. Her artwork is appropriated to a universal commentary of the innate connection between all women and nature, when it only intends to reflect her own relationship with nature. Therefore I argue that Mendieta's work is not essentialist and is misplaced within an ecofeminist perspective.

The misinterpretation of Mendieta's influences from specific Cuban spirituality is argued to have contributed to the essentialist criticism within her work. Blocker and Viso have suggested that the dislocation of Mendieta's personal contexts exposes the identity politics regarding race within 1970s U.S. society. The 'whitening' of her work suggests an attempt to purify the roots of African and indigenous cultures (Blocker 1999, p.30 and Viso 2004, p. 22). Mendieta's response to such disregard of personal contexts can be recognised by comparing Figures 3 and 4. Mendieta leaves a trace of her body as she removes herself from her performances. Bryan-Wilson claims that this alteration envisages an attempt to prevent an ecofeminist perspective to her work (Bryan-Wilson 2013, p. 31). By such drastic aesthetic alteration Mendieta intends to show the specifics regarding her own personal relationship with the earth rather

than a generic female experience. She does not communicate the ideology of ecofeminism and as a personal response, cannot be critiqued as essentialist.

3.3 Essentialist criticism in regards to dualistic thought within the work of Ana Mendieta

The cultural complexity of Mendieta's artwork demonstrates how she is neither ecofeminist nor essentialist, such an analysis is perhaps encouraged through dualistic thinking. Ecofeminists have argued that the innate connection women share with nature can be proven through their equal oppression in society. Viso claims that Mendieta's allegory of Santeria goddess imagery in Figure 3 is often disregarded in order to adhere to 'white' female ideas (Viso 2004, p. 25). Such hierarchical thinking contributed greatly to the misinterpretation of Mendieta's relationship with nature. Her gender was accentuated through misinterpretation of blood symbolism as a signifier for female fertility, illustrated by Figure 4. The intentions of Mendieta's personal experiences are unacknowledged due to the ecofeminist perspective. It is this framework that misunderstands Mendieta's artworks as an account for all women sharing a connection with nature.

Furthermore exposing the misinterpretation of Mendieta's art in Figures 3 and 4, expresses how it is the ecofeminist framework she is associated with that is essentialist, rather than her practice. To relate Mendieta's practice to the ecofeminist theory of dualism reflects the critique of Sturgeon and Twine. Twine claims that 'white' 'middle class' are 'mistakenly assumed to be neutral, tenable

and universal values' (Twine, 2001, p. 6 and Sturgeon, 1999, p. 267). Located within Figures 3 and 4, Mendieta's study of Santeria culture as an element of her heritage is ignored. The cultural connotations as a non-white, Cuban artist are unexposed and replaced by westernised female experiences. As Twine indicates, it would be a mistake to accept the opinion of ecofeminists, whose simplistic view of female oppression conflates the experiences of both white and non-Caucasian women as one.

3.4 Essentialist criticism in regards to environmental consideration in the work of Ana Mendieta.

The reluctance to understand Mendieta's intended context within the artwork encourages an essentialist critique. Through Mendieta's approaches to the earth, Bryan-Wilson suggests that she demonstrates an understanding towards Third World society (Bryan-Wilson 2013, p. 32). This can be recognised through the location of Figure 3. By respecting the land of primitive people, depicted through unused, recessed spaces, Mendieta alludes to an indigenous connectedness with nature. The disregard of influences from Santeria and Latin cultures has encouraged ecofeminists to appropriate Mendieta's respect of nature to the innate connection theory. Through an ecofeminist ideology Mendieta's approach to nature has been made to represent all women. It is the ignorance of Third World narratives within her art from critics that explains why it is accused of essentialism.

Through appropriating Mendieta's practice to an ecofeminist framework, she perhaps indicates the essentialist implications of the claim that women share a deeper empathy to nature. Experiences of Third World civilisations which influenced Mendieta's imagery in Figures 3 and 4 are often used to exemplify environmental issues in westernised society. Exclusive to her Cuban heritage Mendieta's use of Santeria beliefs cannot account for all women. Intended to only reflect upon her own background, the personal depth within her practice shows it is not essentialist.

It is the association of Third World environmental issues to a global population by ecofeminists that deems ecofeminism essentialist. This is demonstrated by Gaard who dictates such misuse by claiming that 'ecofeminists have noted the connections between women's oppression and the oppression of nature by examining global economics' (Gaard, 1993, p. 240). To compare the environmental concerns of Third World women to the Western world presents a generalised view that all women experience similar environmental destruction. The emphasis on indigenous people and their relationship to the earth in the work of Mendieta cannot account for all women's connection with nature. Therefore, to argue that Mendieta presents a universal understanding of environmental concern is disagreeable. The essentialist critique of Mendieta's art is only due to the misunderstanding of her Third World influences by ecofeminist ideology. It can therefore be argued that it is ecofeminism that is essentialist, not the artwork of Mendieta.

3.5 Chapter conclusion.

To an extent the debate surrounding essentialism is important when analysing Mendieta's visual aesthetic of women's connection to nature. Although it may be concluded that Mendieta's work is not intentionally essentialist, through application of social contexts and an ecofeminist framework it often leads to this criticism. This understanding is further explored by Blocker who argues that Mendieta's 'philosophy of the earth must be understood differently' (Blocker 1999, p. 48) to incorporate the importance of her personal experiences. Therefore, it is clear that the gender of the artist is not the entirety of the work's allegory. Her approach to nature incorporates social, cultural and historic specificities exclusive to her, which prevent an essentialist critique of her work.

After such evaluation it can be claimed her response to the innate connection between women and nature is not essentialist. The imagery portrayed by Figures 3 and 4 display a personal connection to nature, and therefore cannot be universalized to all women's experience. Bryan-Wilson identifies that her work is culturally dependent due to the strong influences from Cuban history (Bryan-Wilson 2013, p. 31). Therefore through cultural specificities Mendieta's contexts cannot be applied universally. The cultural influences which her work aims to display have been disregarded in order to mistakenly associate her to ecofeminist ideology.

Through her personal exploration it is clear that Mendieta's work does not represent the universality of the innate connection women share with nature, as argued by ecofeminist theory. This questions the validity in the claim that all women share an innate connection to nature, and also highlights limitations of essentialism within the theory posed by ecofeminists. These limitations are inadvertently emphasised by the ignorance of individual experiences and cultural differences between women, which deems ecofeminism essentialist.

Conclusion

Is the theory of the innate connection between women and nature valid?

To a certain degree the arguments proposed by ecofeminists evidence that some women share an innate connection to nature. This is proven by the theories claimed by Twine and Plumwood that explore the biological abilities of both women and nature as reproductive, fertile organisms. It is true that such an ability to provide life is exclusively female and cannot be affiliated to the male sex. Through scientific recognition it is evident how in some ways women can have an innate connection to nature through a shared fertility.

On the contrary, it is clear that the portrayal of all women as fertile reproductive organisms is an essentialist claim. The assumption of women to provide life enforces a traditional view of women. This raises ethical questions regarding the choice and ability to reproduce. By associating all women to this model, it creates a universal image. The innate connection theory is essentialist, as it is made to speak for ALL women rather than SOME women. To avoid an essentialist critique, ecofeminism must incorporate individual perspectives to prevent a generalisation.

Furthermore, the essentialist criticism of the innate connection theory can be suggested to adhere to patriarchal hierarchies. It is through the categorization of women as universal that highlights the essentialism of dualist theory. This

criticism reveals a contradictive tendency through the reliance on patriarchal beliefs as it reinstates a traditional view of women. To prevent this accusation of essentialism, ecofeminist theory needs to consider cultural dependency. The same structure of theories cannot be applied to all civilisations, as their attitudes to both women and nature differ. It can therefore be claimed that the theory of innate connection follows essentialist ideology.

How can this be applied to the work of Ana Mendieta?

Through the execution of performance Mendieta portrays a personal response to the theory of the connection between herself; a woman, and nature. Her artworks, demonstrated by Figures 3 and 4 depict how some women, but not all women, share a connection to nature. Through an allegory of personal experiences executed within the work, Mendieta highlights the flaws of ecofeminist theory by resisting a universal image of woman.

Furthermore, an understanding to Mendieta's personal influences reveals how her work should not be associated to an ecofeminist framework. It is through deeper understanding from those such as Viso that suggests Mendieta's work holds several dimensions of her biological, spiritual, cultural and environmental relationship with nature. A cultural commentary of Santeria origin diverts her practice away from the social binary structures of U.S society, and demonstrates Mendieta's struggle in identity politics. It is clear from the artist's influences in Figures 3 and 4 that she does not intend to follow an ecofeminist

perspective. Therefore I can argue that it is only due to the ignorance of Mendieta's personal intentions that her work is mistakenly labelled as ecofeminist.

The misunderstanding of Mendieta's artwork from an ecofeminist perspective, often subjects her to unnecessary essentialist critique. Recognised by Herzberg and Bryan-Wilson, Mendieta's use of body was wrongly made to speak for the universal woman (Bryan-Wilson 2013, p. 27 and Herzberg 2004, p.184). This dependence on gender led to the ignorance of racial, cultural and historical themes within Mendieta's identity (Bryan-Wilson, 2013, p. 29). It is only due to an ecofeminist patriarchal disregard of race and culture which is so evident within Figures 3 and 4, that Mendieta is mistakenly critiqued as essentialist.

Overall, Mendieta's artwork is neither essentialist nor a reflection of ecofeminist theory. Through the misappropriation of her themes to patriarchal ideology she perhaps reveals the flaws within ecofeminist argument. She emphasises the essentialism involved in ecofeminism, through her attempts to resist the categorization of all women as a universal stereotype. I can therefore claim that the ecofeminist theory of innate connection between women and nature is essentialist.

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