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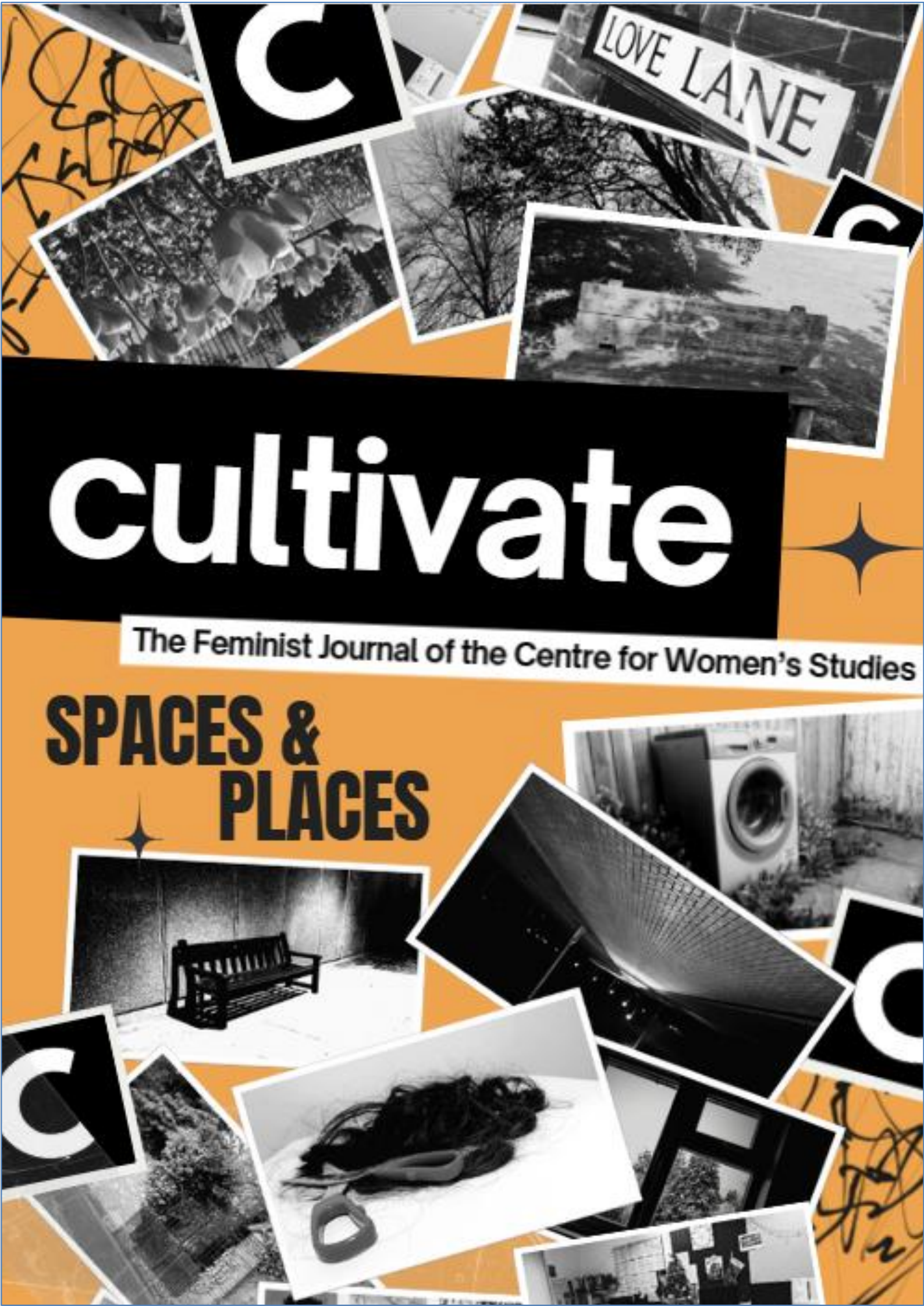
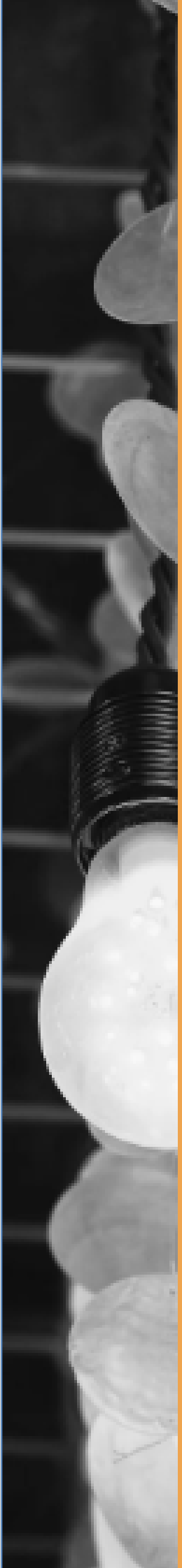


cultivate

The Feminist Journal of the Centre for Women's Studies

SPACES & PLACES



OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Cultivate is an inclusive feminist journal led by the postgraduate community within the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York. The journal champions feminist voices and aims to build and share knowledge by forging dialogues between the academic, activist, creative, verbal, and visual. Cultivate is politically and socially engaged to challenge institutions, transform power-dynamics, promote justice, and strengthen feminist movements.

Spaces and Places

Cultivate

The Feminist Journal of the Centre for Women's Studies

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Finding Identity and Place in Paganism and Critical Ecofeminism by Clare Hughes

Breaking Down and Starting Over

As a child, I was confident in the knowledge that I would, one day, become a biologist simply because I loved nature so much. My bachelor's degree was in zoology, followed by a master's in the environmental sciences and a PhD in biology. My life was proceeding as planned, yet I became profoundly unfulfilled and didn't know why. I felt that there was something 'missing' within my scientific studies, and I struggled with just how 'impersonal' and cold everything felt, feeling particular distress at how the butterflies I was studying were considered 'just specimens', and how to study them, they had to be destroyed. At the height of this distress and halfway through my PhD, I became fixated on the archetype of the Green Man, a typically male, seemingly pagan entity, surprisingly, found in numerous Christian places of worship. His stone-carved face was adorned with leaves and vines, and I became obsessed with his remoteness and wildness. His association with pagan Gods such as Cernunnos and Pan led me down the path of announcing, in secret and to myself, that I was pagan.

Leaving academia and feeling wholly disenchanted with science, I moved between office jobs, desperately trying to quietly engage with the pagan part of me that had now become hidden away from friends and colleagues. In 2019, after hiding this part of myself for so long within highly conformist roles, I had a mental health crisis forcing me to seriously reevaluate my life and the road I had been going down for decades. Following some intense shadow work and introspection, I became a self-employed herbalist offering herbal remedies, aromatherapy products and other 'witchy' wares, yet, still, I remained unsatisfied and increasingly morose regarding how much of my life I had seemingly 'wasted' by not being true to myself. Then, a somewhat crazy idea took root: why not start over, undertake another PhD, and remain in academia this time? Instead of science, this new PhD would have an autoethnographic basis and would study women like myself who are interested in herbal medicine and natural magic.

Over the ensuing months, researching and constructing the synopsis of this new PhD further awakened the true me who had been hidden for so long. Finally, after decades of suppression, I began openly referring to myself as a Hedgewitch, a typically solitary witch who studies plants and the natural world.

Finding Place

Why did it take me so long to acknowledge this witch-related identity? In my experience, anyone in Britain, particularly a woman, who harbours any magical belief or identity, is still widely considered to be quirky, 'cringe' and eccentric at best, and threatening, weird and evil at worst. Such an identity may need concealment due to "fear of discrimination or judgement" (Frampton & Grandison, 2022, p. 23811). It carries a burden of "doubt, shame, and guilt" (Larsen, 2023, p.36), and still influences how some Western herbalists choose to promote themselves and their practices (Evans, 2008; Nissen, 2010; Bitcon et al., 2015; Waddell, 2016; El-Qawas, 2023). Despite this, in the UK, at least, the number of people who identify as Pagan is on the increase (ONS, 2022). Is the witch-related identity, therefore, becoming more mainstream, or is there another factor at work? One hypothesis regarding the increase in witch-related identities, especially amongst women, relates to the under-representation of the common woman throughout history, apart from in the early modern European witch trials, where women were forced into the centre of attention (Zwissler, 2018). Such visibility may encourage women who feel unseen to base their own identities, histories and stories on the witch, "with so few models of women's power and agency from which to draw, the witch stands out starkly" (Zwissler, 2018, p. 11). She becomes a figurehead, enabling other women access to the role of a complete and equal actor in an otherwise male-dominated arena. She provides a mandate for contemporary women to feel anger, lending rhetorical weight to modern feminist and activist movements and supplying emancipation (Zwissler, 2016).

I have always considered myself a feminist, with one of my earliest memories from secondary school being the accusation that I was one (my parents told me in no uncertain terms that to be called a feminist was an insult). Did my witch-related identity, my herbalism, and my predilection for animism make me more of a feminist, or was it enough to say that I have a strong belief that women are subjugated appallingly via a myriad of overt and covert ways? Likewise, I still

retained my love of the natural world and ecology despite being a "recovering scientist" (Blackie, 2018, p. 26), but I was no longer involved in anything environmentally proactive. In my mind, my form of feminism and environmentalism was merely stage-dressing and of utterly no consequence to the wider world and its horrors of femicide and ecocide.

It was the discovery of Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) and 'Nature in the Active Voice' (2009) that finally resolved these dilemmas for me with her discourses on the power imbalances inherent in dualisms (pervading my life was the dualism of science versus spirituality), philosophical animism and "thinking differently" (Plumwood, 2009, p. 122). I found further recognition from ecofeminist discourses (Warren, 1994; Fawcett, 2000; Gaard, 2017; Berger, 2020; Siegel, 2024), magical feminism (Wells, 2007; Rapson, 2020), enchantment (Weber, 1958; Waddell, 2016; Blackie, 2018; Beaman, 2021), and animism (Harvey, 2014). Finally, the intersections between my love of nature, spirituality, and feminism became clearer and consolidated into a feminist theory that held particular resonance for me: Critical Ecofeminism.

Critical Ecofeminism and Moving Forward

Critical Ecofeminism (Plumwood, 1993; Gaard, 2017; Puleo, 2017) builds upon a foundation of Ecofeminism, coined in 1974 by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne (d'Eaubonne, 2022) and can be defined as an activist and academic movement that perceives critical connections between the exploitation of women and nature (Lorentzen & Eaton, 2002). Early ecofeminist iterations struggled with this essentialist connection of a greater affinity between women and nature, sitting in dualistic opposition to man and culture (Lorentzen & Eaton, 2002), generating many critiques (Plumwood, 1993; Lorentzen & Eaton, 2002; Plumwood, 2009; Gaard, 2017; Carfore, 2021). As stated by Val Plumwood (1993), "Women have faced an unacceptable choice within patriarchy with respect to their ancient identity as nature. They either accept it (naturalism) or reject it (and endorse the dominant mastery model)" (p. 36). Critical Ecofeminism addresses this by rejecting both "the model of women and women's reproductivity as undifferentiated nature" and "the attempt to fit them into a model of oppositional and masculinised culture." (Plumwood, 1993, p. 39). It rejects harmful Western dualisms such as male/female and culture/nature responsible for exploiting both women and nature, where both are seen as passive and non-

agent and a background for the achievements of a dominant force (Plumwood, 1993; Li, 1993). It endorses attentive listening and acknowledging that humans exist within a web of relationships with other sentient and intelligent entities, resulting in an ecofeminist transspecies ethic (Gaard, 2017).

This theory made perfect sense to me, yet I was daunted by attempting such a paradigm-shifting change in consciousness and behaviour. Undertaking 'value-shifting activities' is one way to transform ingrained thoughts via intraconnective thinking, such as that seen in Indigenous Worldviews and Traditional Ecological Knowledges (TEK) (Macy & Brown, 2014; Siegel, 2024). To recognise animism, where "the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human and that life is always lived in relationship to others" (Harvey, 2005, p. xi) and where we can witness "creativity and agency in the other-than-human world around us" (Plumwood, 2009, p.122) can be fundamental to enabling such a shift opening the door to attentive trans-species listening (Plumwood, 2009; Gaard, 2017). In Gaard's *Critical Ecofeminism* (2017), I found inspiring examples of attentive trans-species listening regarding communications with rocks, stones and eucalyptus trees. Upon reading these stories, I realised I had been engaging in attentive trans-species listening with non-human others for most of my life, but had put it down to general 'weirdness'.

As I begin the next phase of my life, I now feel a complete sense of place and my belonging within this world of Critical Ecofeminism, where my identity and practices as a Hedgewitch can be regarded as a value-shifting activity that enables the paradigm shift needed to address the serious issues of dualism in Western society. My identity and my place in society enables subversive female empowerment, fosters a trans-species and non-human others relationship, disrupts culture/nature and magic/science dualisms, enables consciousness-shifting modes of thinking, and challenges the omnipotence of the Western human-centric society. I finally feel that I can make a small contribution to this world through my mere existence, voice, and actions, a feeling that has been lacking for many decades.

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