

Gender, Landscape, and Art: Georgia O’Keeffe’s Relationship with the Ghost Ranch Landscape

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Abstract

Understanding how an artist’s relationship with a heritage landscape is gendered increases our appreciation of the landscape and how it is represented in art. Georgia O’Keeffe’s association with Ghost Ranch, New Mexico is an example of a personal relationship that can develop between an artist and a particular landscape. To know landscape with the body, to develop an intimacy with landscape, and to communicate with that landscape are ideas from ecofeminist theory that help us understand this relationship. Findings from a workshop at Ghost Ranch confirmed that experiencing the landscape as gendered can influence an individual’s artistic expression. Applying those findings to facility design and interpretive materials can encourage such exploration and deepening of experience of the landscape.

Key Words

Heritage landscapes and art, relationship with landscape, gender, ecofeminism, Georgia O’Keeffe, Ghost Ranch

Introduction

This paper explores the boundaries of historic landscape preservation by examining the expression of culture, relationship, and gender—particularly the relationship between landscape and art. Although a number of landscapes associated with artists and writers have been considered for, or established as, protected areas (e.g., Weir Farm National Historic Site, the Willa Cather State Historic Site, and the Rio Chama Valley in connection with O’Keeffe), the importance of an artist’s perceptions and expressions remains a minor theme within landscape preservation (USDI 1992b). By focusing on the intangible relationship between artist and place, this paper adds to the growing literature on the role of intangible elements (e.g., imagination, cultural associations, and symbolism) in how landscapes are valued and represented in art (Thompson 1995). Race, ethnicity, class, and (to some degree) age have received growing attention within recent landscape preservation scholarship (Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture 2007; Alanen and Melnick 2000; Wilson and Groth 2003; Groth and Bressi 1997), but attention to gender lags behind. As Robert Melnick stated, “Any consideration of issues of nature and culture in historic landscapes, therefore, may well take into account a broad range of analytical constructs, extending from ecofeminism

to landscape ecology . . . To be gender-blind is to deny the historical variants in landscape experience” (Melnick 2000, 23). Writers such as Dolores Hayden (2003), Doreen Massey (1994), and Vera Norwood (1993) have provided examples of the role of gender and feminist issues in analyzing the social construction of space and women’s relationship with nature; and Page Putnam Miller (1992) has laid the groundwork for increasing the number of nationally significant heritage sites established due to their specific association with women’s history.

However, within the field of historic landscape preservation, attention to gender has focused more on documenting women’s contributions to the creation and preservation of landscapes (Huyck 1988; USDI 1992a; Eyring 2003; Cowley and Eyring 2003), rather than addressing gender dynamics (Cowley 2000; Huyck 2003; McCullough 2003). Within historic landscape interpretation programs, it is important to move beyond simply including women to an analysis of gender dynamics. The study of gender dynamics considers the experiences and viewpoints of both women and men, and explores the interrelationships of associations of both the masculine and the feminine. Gender dynamics is concerned with how gender plays a role within culturally normative concepts, social institutions, power relationships, and identity formation (Scott 1988, 43-44), as well as the role gender plays in the social construction and perception of place (Sewell 2003). This paper considers gender dynamics (e.g. how women and men address and express gender-in-the-landscape) and highlights one woman’s response to landscape.

In this paper, I explore Georgia O’Keeffe’s relationship with the landscape of Ghost Ranch, New

Mexico as an example of an artist’s personal and intimate association with a heritage landscape. A study of O’Keeffe’s writing and images indicates that gender was a subtle factor in her work, and that she held much in common with ecofeminist ways of relating to place. Findings from a Ghost Ranch painting workshop indicated that how men and women experience landscape as gendered, and how they connect with that landscape personally makes a difference to their experiences and the images they produce (Cowley 2006). The intent of this paper is not to read into O’Keeffe’s work what she did not intend, but rather, to be open to whether these factors influenced her experiences and creative work. An ecofeminist perspective on O’Keeffe’s relationship with the landscape might open up new possibilities for landscape interpretation and design of visitor facilities, expanding the variety of opportunities for visitors at Ghost Ranch and at other areas associated with O’Keeffe.

Concepts and Context

Heritage landscapes are geographic areas valued in connection with a community’s past. They can include areas considered either natural or cultural, and need not show evidence of human manipulation (Melnick 2000; Schama 1995). Heritage landscapes associated with artists and their work may or may not be considered scenic. They focus more on aesthetic meaning than aesthetic quality. Understanding how artists’ relationships with heritage landscapes are gendered may help us appreciate both the landscape and how it is represented in art. It can help us, as well, to understand our own response to the landscape and the art. Whether or not the landscape is experienced as gendered—as female, male, or androgynous—can influence artistic responses to the landscape.

Ecofeminist theory maintains that there are close connections between how women, people of color, and the poor are treated and how, in turn, the natural environment is treated (Warren 1997, xi). An example is gendering the land as female, a strong common theme in Western culture. Exploration and settlement of the U.S. West was often described as taming the virginal female earth (Kolodny 1975) or raping the land. Literary ecofeminism addresses how we can redefine the nature of our relationship with the landscape, moving away from conquering and controlling towards communication and nurturing—more of a conversation and cooperative venture between equals (Legler 1997). Relating with the landscape through one’s body, developing a personal intimacy with the landscape, and communicating with the landscape (Legler 1997) can help us make this change. These ways of relating with nature are not necessarily exclusive to ecofeminists; male artists and nature writers like Walt Whitman (Whitman 1958) share these approaches. However, it is significant that the emphasis within a feminist approach focuses on ways of relating to nature important to many women.

Relating with the landscape can go beyond sight, smell, taste, and touch to involve a sense of feeling and knowing the landscape through the whole body “from the inside” (Lippard 2002)—a merging of one’s whole self with the landscape. Some ecofeminists include an eroticism with this sense of merging with the land—“eros” as life-force energy, creativity, imagination, and the capacity for joy in addition to sexuality (Silko 1993). Intimacy can go beyond familiarity with and detailed knowledge of the landscape to a sense of loving the land as one would love a person. Intimacy may also entail identifying with and interacting with the

landscape in a personal way, for instance, through the act of painting. Communication with the landscape can be one-way or two-way. Viewing and describing a landscape as a “scene” is an example of one-way communication. We apply our ideas to the landscape without expecting a response. In two-way communication the artist senses the landscape “talking back” and the relationship as a kind of conversation. The potential for two-way communication is based on the belief that nature, or a landscape, is an independent, conscious being with voice and volition. Where animals and natural elements like the wind can talk with us, two-way communication can be described in terms of actual language (LeGuin 1987). In terms of sensation and belief, we feel “pulled” in a certain direction on a walk. An ecofeminist approach draws attention to the ways in which highly personal and intuitive connections to landscape evolve through direct, sensual experience.

An ecofeminist perspective also illuminates how language and culture may encourage us to associate landscape and gender in ways often subtle and unconscious. When we liken landforms to human anatomy, or associate landscape with characteristics of the feminine and masculine (e.g., soft/hard, passive/active, curvilinear/linear dualities), we are gendering—assigning gender to—the landscape. Assigning gender can reinforce gender stereotypes. For instance, columns, steep cliffs, and other vertical forms are often associated with the masculine, whereas caves, fissures, and gently rolling terrain are often associated with the feminine. In contrast to gender stereotypes, experiencing the landscape as gendered is an interactive process where we respond to “suggestions” from the landscape by intuitive or sensory rather than cognitive means. We can experience a landscape as a female,



Figure 1. Ghost Ranch, New Mexico. (Photo by author, 2005)



Figure 2. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Red Hills with the Pedernal* (*Pedernal and Red Hills*), 1936. Georgia O'Keeffe, (1887-1986). Oil on linen. 19 3/4 x 20 3/4 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of New Mexico, Department of Cultural Affairs. Bequest of Helen Miller Jones, 1986.

male, or androgynous being with whom we can communicate. We can experience the landscape primarily through our bodies; and we can experience the landscape as a combination or alternation of male and female, as an animal or non-human presence without specific gender, or as gendered but not sexual, say, as paternal or maternal. Because of its awareness of these experiences and relationships, an ecofeminist perspective is especially pertinent to a heritage landscape like Georgia O'Keeffe's Ghost Ranch—a place that is historically

significant, in part, because of the complicated and intimate relationship with landscape expressed in the work of a major twentieth-century artist.

O'Keeffe and Ghost Ranch

O'Keeffe first visited Ghost Ranch in August 1934 (Figure 1), and felt an instant relationship to the dramatic colors and shapes and huge sky of the Ghost Ranch landscape. Living and working at Ghost Ranch offered O'Keeffe the privacy, solitude, and self-determination that she craved after the intense scrutiny of her life, her work, and her body in New York. She thought, "this is my world" (O'Keeffe 1981), and, "it fit me exactly" (Adato 1977). In New York, the display of Alfred Steiglitz's nude photographs of O'Keeffe had encouraged art critics to inaccurately interpret her abstract and flower images as representations of female anatomy and O'Keeffe's sexuality (Lynes 1989; Chave 1992). O'Keeffe consistently refuted claims of sexual content in her images. She insisted that she painted what she saw (O'Keeffe 1976) and this was true for her Ghost Ranch landscapes as well as her flower images. Many discussions of gender and O'Keeffe's work are limited either to supporting or refuting these sexualized interpretations (Cowley 2006), when in fact gender is present in her work in far more subtle ways. She related with landscape in ways characteristic of and important to many women and feminists. Her images illustrate a non-traditional blending of feminine and masculine forms and qualities. O'Keeffe experienced the landscape as gendered, and her intimacy with the Ghost Ranch landscape involved communication and knowing the landscape through the body. Without this understanding, major aspects of her intimacy with the landscape have been overlooked and her images misinterpreted.

O’Keeffe’s writings indicate that even though she sometimes assigned gender to landscape features—she once referred to the moon as “he” (Pollitzer 1988, 148-9)—she didn’t refer to the landscape as a whole as “he” or “she.” For her, women and femaleness were not special and rarified aspects of nature, but were part of the whole environment. Her approach to the landscape involved gender in some subtle and non-traditional ways. For example, she combined stereotypical associations (e.g., moon = female, mountain = male) within images that portrayed a landscape with human or animal sensuousness (Figure 2). And, she made hard cliffs, bones, and distant horizons as approachable and personal as flowers.

O’Keeffe communicated with her Ghost Ranch home primarily through her senses and feelings rather than through language. Through the painting process, she combined day-to-day familiarity, relating to elements within the landscape like the Cerro Pedernal, the red hills, and the moon as companions with whom she shared her days, and a sense of two-way communication with the places she painted. When just arrived in New Mexico, she expressed a sense of communication with her new home: “. . . but the Mountain calls one and the desert—and the sagebrush—the country seems to call one in a way that one has to answer it” (Cewart et al. 1987, 200). Communication with nature was a matter of being with the landscape over time, of listening and observing, and of responding to colors and shapes. She reached out to the landscape through her aesthetic intensity and domestic familiarity, and at times felt that the landscape responded to her. For example, she painted the v-shaped hills outside her kitchen window, and felt that they “spoke to me quietly” (O’Keeffe 1976, 85).

O’Keeffe felt and experienced the landscape not only through her senses but also through her body as a whole. She referred to a section of red hills “. . . it is so bare—with a sort of ages old feeling of death on it—still it is warm and soft and I love it with my skin” (Cewart et al. 1987, 243). O’Keeffe experienced, and interacted with, landforms as alive and sensual, but not necessarily symbolic of human bodies. While some of her paintings (e.g., Figure 2) may be difficult not to read as bodies, her letters and other writings do not indicate that she made this connection. O’Keeffe sensualized the landscape as a whole (she enhanced curves and made the rough-textured hills look smooth) rather than specifically associating landforms with bodies.

Intimacy with a landscape is influenced by whether we relate to the landscape up close or at a distance, through thinking or feeling. O’Keeffe interacted with the landscape visually through her art, kines-thenically through her long walks and rides, and sensually, through feeling the wind, the soil, and also feeling colors. She related to the landscape both through her body and through aesthetic analysis, and aesthetic analysis brought her back to her feelings. Both near and far elements of the landscape caught her attention, and this was expressed in her paintings as she juxtaposed foreground and background, leaving out the middle ground (Collins 1980).

O’Keeffe was not an ecofeminist (the term was not used widely until the 1980s), but she did share ways of relating to landscape that are emphasized by many ecofeminists, and which reflect many women’s experiences. She expressed a strong aversion to being identified as a feminist, principally because she wanted to avoid association with sexualized and inaccurate feminist interpreta-



Figure 3. Ghost Ranch, Red Hills site, 2005. (Photo by author)



Figure 4. Ghost Ranch, Box Canyon site, 2005. (Photo by author)

tions of her work (Lynes 1992). Some feminists insisted on sexualized interpretations as much as male critics earlier in the century, but for different reasons. They wanted to herald O’Keeffe as the “foremother” of feminist art that reclaimed women’s bodies as strong and vital (Chicago 1987). In actuality, O’Keeffe was very much a feminist through her actions and her belief in women’s abilities and rights (Lynes 1992). O’Keeffe was one of a number of women artists during this period who, through both their lifestyles and their images, helped expand the range of what was

possible and accepted for women (Norwood and Monk 1987; Udall 1996; Dijkstra 1998). Her strong portrayals of the harsh and vast desert landscape moved the norm for women artists’ subject matter even further from the earlier norm of small-scale nature and domestic scenes. An ecofeminist perspective is thus helpful both in illuminating the cultural context of O’Keeffe’s art, and in opening up a unique perspective for exploring the artist’s relationship to landscape. Could an ecofeminist approach be applied to create new ways for visitors to experience and appreciate the landscape of O’Keeffe’s Ghost Ranch? Perhaps the answer to this question could be found in a workshop that explored landscape, gender, and interpretation.

The On-Site Workshop

The Georgia O’Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, and The Ghost Ranch Educational Center and Retreat (Lopez 2000; M. 2002; Lynes et al. 2004; The Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation, n.d.) have educational and art programs which include painting workshops focused on O’Keeffe and contemplative walks with contemporary authors. These programs help participants understand O’Keeffe’s relationship with the Ghost Ranch landscape and provide opportunities to experience the landscape in ways similar to the way O’Keeffe did. Although gender and ecofeminist ideas are not currently integrated into those programs, these themes could enrich the experiences and understanding of participants.

To see how a focus on gender and ecofeminist ideas might influence workshop participants’ experiences and artwork, I conducted an on-site workshop at Ghost Ranch in May 2005. The workshop encouraged participants to consider whether

they experienced the landscape as gendered and to explore ecofeminist ways of relating with the landscape through on-site painting sessions. They were to use O’Keeffe as a model and jumping-off point to exploring their own relationship. Ten people (eight women and two men) participated in the two-day workshop. Creative sessions were held in the red hills area (Figure 3) (accessible only by prior arrangement and approval of the Ghost Ranch Educational Center), and within the Box Canyon Trail area (Figure 4).

Following my introduction to the concepts of gender and landscape, one participant explored these aspects in images (Figures 5, 6, and 7). Her images portray different overall landscape character, with the masculine landscape portrayed with straight lines and separated colors, the feminine with more curvilinear lines and blended colors, and the androgynous as a combination. Participants indicated that relating to the landscape as male rather than female was unfamiliar, but not necessarily uncomfortable. Most important to a number of workshop participants was that the landscape felt alive, and for some, experiencing the landscape as gendered made it seem even more alive. For one of the men, the experience felt like a dialogue with a living entity. He perceived both his own gender and the gender of the landscape as a flux between male and female.

Some participants were uncomfortable associating gender with landscape, perhaps because they thought they had to make a conscious decision to assign either a female or male gender. Assigning gender to the landscape (as opposed to experiencing the landscape as gendered) can impose boundaries on our experience, understanding, and interpretation, and we need to be aware if we



Figure 5. Suzanne Otter. *Masculine Landscape*. 2005. (Courtesy of the artist)



Figure 6. Suzanne Otter. *Feminine Landscape*. 2005. (Courtesy of the artist)



Figure 7. Suzanne Otter. *Androgynous Landscape*. 2005. (Courtesy of the artist)



Figure 8. Gary Wellman, no title (landscape in the Box Canyon Trail area). 2005. (Courtesy of the artist)

are doing this. Assigning a female gender to the landscape is so ingrained in the Western psyche that not being aware of how we might already be gendering the landscape is equivalent to gendering the landscape as female. By being conscious about gendering the landscape in this way, we open up to the possibility of questioning traditional gender associations. We open to new possibilities, for example, of experiencing the landscape as masculine, as a nurturing male being, or as a strong, hard, or challenging female being. This approach stretches our boundaries of understanding and experience (Nash 1996).

As with O’Keeffe, relating with the landscape through their senses and learning to know the landscape through their bodies in an intimate way was something many participants enjoyed, whether or not they experienced the landscape as gendered (Cowley 2006). During the painting session where participants focused on intimacy and communication, they felt connected to the landscape through the scale, color, dynamism, and visual power of the landscape in addition to physically feeling the textures of soil and rock. Assigning human qualities to the landscape helped some feel a closer relationship to their subject, and that communication with the landscape was possible. Two

participants' paintings are not obviously gendered (Figures 8, 9). One included a male cowboy figure, which may hint at a masculine association with the landscape (Cowley 2006).

Asked to consider whether they thought O'Keeffe experienced two-way communication with the

Ghost Ranch landscape, both men and women said that giving back to the landscape in some way was necessary for real two-way communication. It was not enough for her to have lived within and to have felt a strong emotional connection to the landscape—to love it with her skin—she had to give something back to the landscape for it to be

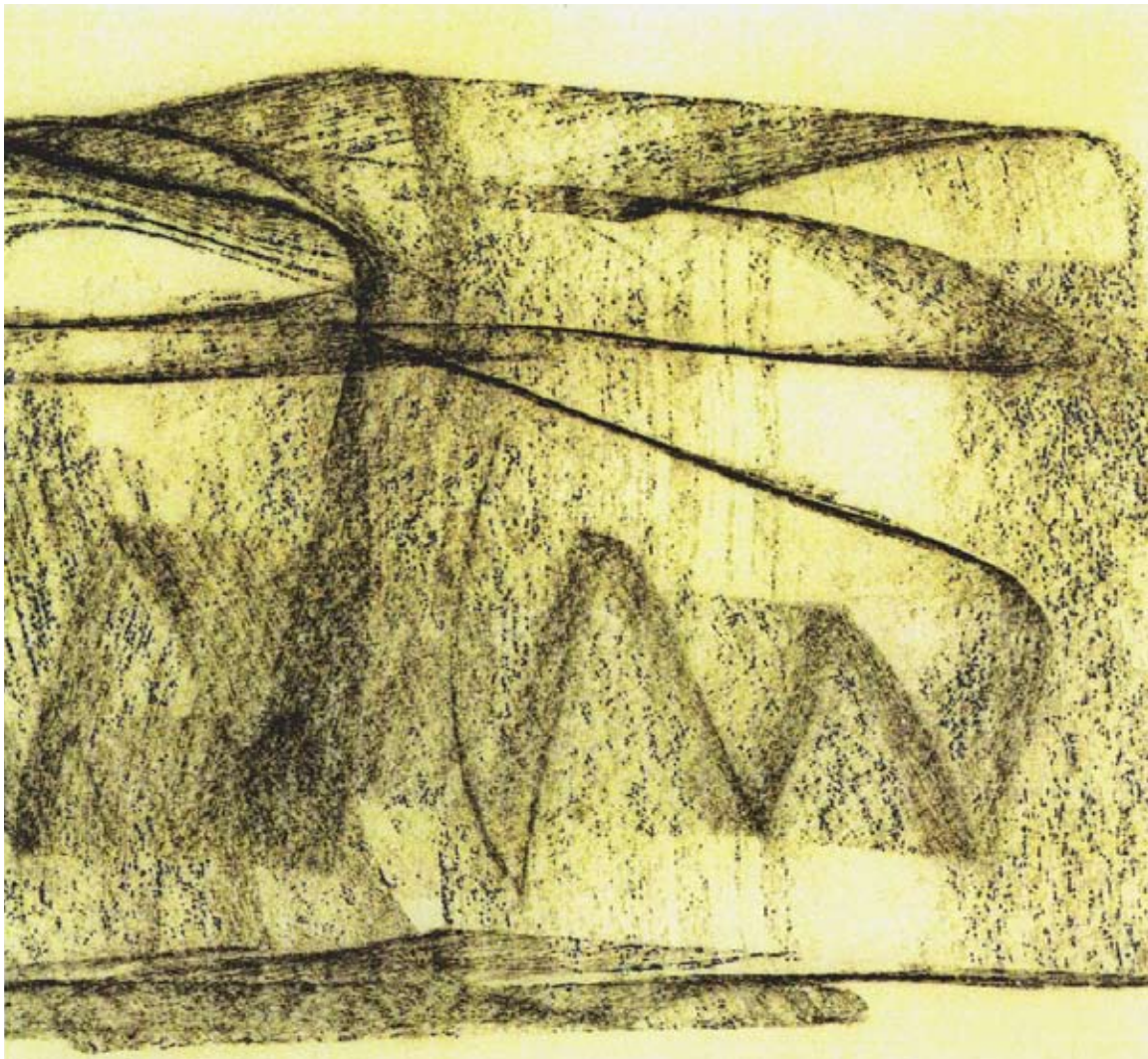


Figure 9. Maria Munguia Wellman, no title (landscape in the Box Canyon Trail area). 2005. (Courtesy of the artist)

a two-way relationship. One could argue that her paintings and the legacy of her life at Ghost Ranch are forms of giving back, since they have influenced our perceptions and valuing of the Ghost Ranch landscape, which in turn influences our appreciation of conservation efforts.

Implications for Facility Design and Interpretation

We can learn about, interact with, and appreciate heritage landscapes in many ways, including painting, writing, nature study, hiking, and meditation. The U.S. National Park Service's interpretation goals include helping "visitors to explore their own intellectual and emotional connections to the natural and cultural resources that comprise shared heritage" (Kohen and Sikoryak 2005, 4), ideally through direct contact with the tangible. The key to encouraging personal relationships with a landscape is providing as direct an experience of the landscape as possible with a minimum of distracting elements. Facility design should be minimal and simple.

In 1992, the National Park Service conducted a *Study of Alternatives* for interpretation of the O'Keeffe landscape in northern New Mexico, resulting in three alternatives. The first alternative called for a driving tour with limited trail access. The second alternative called for a minimally-designed contemplative space and trails into the landscape. The third alternative called for a substantial on-site visitor center. The second alternative - the contemplative/interpretive option— reinforces the philosophy of direct experience with minimal distraction. In a mostly natural setting like Ghost Ranch, structures, trails,

and seating are best kept rustic and naturalistic in design, with signage and interpretive waysides kept to a minimum. With interpretive materials covering historical and biographical information kept within a visitor center, natural trails leading into the landscape can provide undisturbed access to experiences, as at Ghost Ranch. Trail brochures can provide more information and stimulating questions, as the Weir Farm National Historic Site trail brochure does (Weir Farm Art Center 1994). (Figure 10).

Gendered landscape and ecofeminist ideas could be easily incorporated into this kind of trail brochure, for example, by including information on how the artist might have experienced the landscape as gendered, or by posing questions the reader might consider asking themselves about experiencing the landscape as gendered. However, it seems unlikely that a trail brochure or an exhibit in a visitors' center would be the most effective way to encourage exploration of the complex emotional connections and insights of an ecofeminist perspective. To realize the benefits of an ecofeminist interpretive strategy, alternative techniques such as intensive interpretive experiences in the form of workshops are necessary.

Joan Scott (1998, 10) provides a useful approach to exploring gender issues, which could be used in a workshop. Scott argues for moving beyond 1) including women, their points of view and contributions, to 2) articulating gender dynamics, and then on to 3) articulating a new model of gender relations that does not fall back on traditional stereotypes. For example, discussions during my Ghost Ranch workshop started with describing O'Keeffe's relationship with the Ghost Ranch



Figure 10. Weir Farm Trust, Painting Sites Trail Brochure, Stop #1. 1994. (Courtesy Weir Farm Trust and National Park Service, Weir Farm National Historic Site)

landscape (Scott's #1, including women). It then moved on to discussing how women and men in the group felt about addressing the masculine and feminine in the landscape (Scott's #2, articulating gender dynamics, albeit on a small scale). And finally, participants explored how they could experience their own relationship with the landscape, including experiencing it as gendered, using ideas that help us let go of gender stereotypes (Scott's #3, articulating a new model). Ecofeminist critique is an important corrective for stereotypes in gendered landscape interpretation. It can help remind us that stereotypes over-generalize ideas and that we must always be wary of using them as the basis for normative prescriptions of landscape.

Conclusion

Considering O'Keeffe's work in the context of gender analysis and ecofeminist ways of relating

to landscape can help us understand the nuances of how her images relate to how she lived with and experienced this landscape. The majority of workshop participants felt that exploring gender enlarged their experience of the landscape and broadened their thinking about O'Keeffe's relationship with Ghost Ranch. The workshop thus suggests that exploring how artists' relationships with heritage landscapes are gendered helps us appreciate a landscape and how that landscape is represented in art. Such exploration can even help us understand our own response to the landscape. Whether or not the landscape is experienced as gendered—as female, male, or androgynous—can influence artistic responses to the landscape. We can experience the landscape through our bodies and our senses, we can develop a personal intimacy with the landscape, and we can “communicate” with the landscape in various ways. All these relationships with place have much in common with

ecofeminist ideas, and, in turn, are key to Georgia O’Keeffe’s relationship with the Ghost Ranch landscape in New Mexico.

This expanded understanding of how visitors experience place, combined with the desire to encourage visitors to develop a relationship with heritage landscapes, can in turn influence facility design and interpretation at heritage sites. A number of important issues remain. If we expand the boundaries of our thinking to allow for nature and landscape to be identified as male or androgynous rather than predominately female, would this make us more preservation-minded? If we take a deeper look at gender and landscape dynamics – from a variety of cultural and racial points of view – how might that influence historic landscape preservation scholarship and practice? These questions and the ideas in this paper, all start with our own individual relationship with landscape. Relating with a landscape is a first step to caring about it, and caring about a landscape is a first step to caring for it.

Author’s Note

The opinions expressed in this paper are based on my dissertation work, and do not represent opinions of the National Park Service.

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