

A Feminist Aesthetics of Nature

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Abstract

This article examines the relatively unstudied field of the aesthetics of nature from a feminist perspective. Currently a feminist aesthetics of nature does not exist in scholarship, though I argue in our age of eco-crisis this is necessary. I explore what this feminist approach might entail by discussing three essential elements to the current masculinist study of nature: 1) the role of the subject or observer, 2) method of appreciation, and 3) appropriate object for appreciation. By focusing on the recent impasse in feminism, between essentialism and non-essentialism, this paper looks at how each side of the debate would approach these above three topics, and what future paths feminism might take in creating an adequate study of the aesthetics of nature.

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“What I am interpreting and criticizing is precisely the fact that the philosophical subject, historically masculine, has reduced every other to a relation within himself – his nature, his universe, his complement, his projection, his inverse, his instrument [...] within his own world, his own horizon – Luce Irigaray *Democracy Begins Between Two*

[A transformative feminism] makes the connection between all systems of oppression explicit, including racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, speciesism, and naturism; it would provide a central theoretical place for the diversity of women’s experiences even if it means abandoning the project of attempting to formulate one overarching feminist theory or *aesthetics theory* or one women’s voice; it would promote values and social processes (such as care, friendship, reciprocity in relationships, appropriate trust, diversity) underplayed or lost in traditional [...] ethics; and it would challenge masculinist versions of science and technology – Karen Warren

This article will focus on the question: what might a feminist aesthetics of nature look like? Ronald Hepburn, a leading authority on the aesthetics of nature, suggests that natural beauty has been excluded from the theory of aesthetics; analogously feminists suggest women have also been excluded from the theory of aesthetics. The purpose of my paper then is to suggest a feminist aesthetics of nature, which to date remains to be theorized. My question of what this aesthetics might entail is not an easy one to answer as there are two prominent, yet contrasting theories on what just is the right way for women to appreciate or connect with nature. The first view connects woman’s body essentially, thus attributing women a different understanding of what and how nature is to be appreciated. This view can be aligned with the works of Luce Irigaray. The second view is a response or rejection of woman’s natural bodily connection with nature, and therefore, aims at distancing women from nature, arguing that the connection of women with sex and gender is one of pure social construction. This second view dominates much of contemporary feminist thinking but especially holds an important place in Simone de Beauvoir’s writing.

Neither view, I will argue, however is satisfactory in a feminist aesthetics of nature. Although both theories rightfully critique women and nature's traditional subordination to male subjectivity and authority, both theories place too much weight, time and emphasis on the historical binaries such as woman/man, nature/culture, object/subject without questioning the underlying construction for these binaries. It is not my aim to deny the historical subordination both women and nature have endured at the hands of man and the patriarchal order, but rather to shift the discussion to how women might rethink woman's space in nature, and particularly woman's role in an aesthetic appreciation of nature.

My purpose for focusing on a feminist critique is not to replace the old, patriarchal model with a feminist one, that would undoubtedly lead us nowhere or further with our theory of aesthetics, but rather I feel a feminist position has the ability to show which theories are weak and problematic not only for women but for men as well and can offer insightful criticisms. Within this paper I will look at three important feminist criticisms in current aesthetics of nature theory:

1. The subject or observer
2. Method of appreciation
3. Appropriate object for appreciation

First, I would like to briefly outline some arguments for an essentialist position, and what the pros and cons of such a position may offer for women in the work of aesthetic appreciation.

Essentialism and the Aesthetics of Nature

An essentialist position such as Irigaray's, attempts to reclaim the female body and woman's socialized feminine traits as positive rather than negative qualities, but not as opposed to and negating male qualities. This position would reject traditional works of art, philosophy and scientific thinking which portrays the female body and nature as passive, objects to be controlled and mechanized by man and the patriarchal hierarchy. The result of man's artistic and scientific misunderstanding of the female body and the natural world has "promoted an ideology of power" (Alaimo, 2). Irigaray's essentialist position suggests patriarchal power, premised only on masculine laws, is misguided and doesn't allow for woman and nature to occupy any other space than one of subordination, one of object, one of other to sameness or identity to the male. Irigaray writes; "One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it" (Irigaray as quoted by Alaimo 6). Comparisons between woman's external body and nature can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle.

In both Plato's *Timaeus* and Aristotle's *On the Generation of Animals* women and nature are associated as objects of both passivity and formless matter to man's activity and form. This traditional view, or logos, is furthered by Descartes' rationalism in *Meditations*, and Bacon's "domination over creation" (Bacon as quoted by Broude, 146) in *The Masculine Birth and Time*. Descartes' rationalism although rejected in the Romantic era in favor of a more emotional bond with nature is still a masculinist romanticism, evident in such poets as Byron and Shelley whereby nature and woman are again, regulated according to man's desire and needs as throughout history nature

has been seen as the foundation for woman's natural inferiority and man's natural superiority.

Therefore, for essentialist theorists such as Irigaray, woman's natural, sexually different body must be rethought; she argues it is exactly because women *are* biologically closer to the natural world than men, that women are capable of sustaining, protecting, caring and appreciating nature differently than men. Irigaray's essentialist argument for a different relationship between woman and nature, one that is an alternative to same and other, focuses on the primary role of the body, its external formalist features (shape, form, color) and internal features (reproductive organs such as the womb) as well as social constructions, habits, experiences and behaviors.

Irigaray's reinterpretation of the feminine role aims for disrupting the logic that produces and reproduces male subjectivity. In reconsidering the terms by which women become subjects that is non-masculine subjects Irigaray is also advocating a new relationship to the other. Rather than accepting woman's body as specularization, that is creating a mirror for man to see his own image reflected back at him, she shows one of intimacy, not purely the visual, or even the sensory, but one of perceiving.

Irigaray's perceiving attempts to overcome the subject-object split which she says is a masculine ideal. "It is possible to integrate the micro with the macrocosm, the nature inside me with that which surrounds me, and that it is possible to communicate with the other thanks to this knowledge...has taught me to perceive rather than simply to experience through the senses" (Irigaray 115 DIL). Irigaray's sentiment here is that the subject does not need to consume or appropriate the object in any way, but meditates on the object through spiritual awareness or aesthetic appreciation.

In a sense Irigaray might agree with Berleant's unified theory of aesthetics, which attempts to unify a theory of art with a theory of nature under one philosophical umbrella of aesthetics. Berleant's unified theory for Irigaray would no doubt be an appreciation that radically directed our appreciation of both art and nature away from patriarchal methods, such as judgments, and images such as beauty, paying careful attention to the feminist concern for woman's difference.

Irigaray argues for an indistinguishable relationship between woman and nature for creating an agency of subjectivity that is different from man's subjectivity; man's subjectivity strives for transcending matter. Despite Irigaray's reaffirmation of woman and nature as one that resists nature as an other of sameness and otherness, her kind of claims have been challenged by such thinkers as Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard argues there is a difficulty when affirming a positive identity for women because Irigaray is also affirming an ideology of power.

In affirming an ideology of power Irigaray is supported by another essentialist Rosi Braidotti, who insists sexual difference is ontological difference. When Braidotti says; "To be is to be either a man or a woman" (Jagger, 155) she and other feminists are actually supporting "an emphasis on the positivity of power and desire, and of the subject who negotiates both power and desire; positivity in the sense of the productive nature of power; the productivity of desire, power as 'productive of the subject'" (Baudrillard as paraphrased by Grace, 67). What Baudrillard is really alluding to here is that women's focus on productive powers such as proposed by Judith Butler and her

alignment with Foucault, and different identities and different desires such as advocated by the work of Braidotti and her engagement with Deleuze, is exactly in alignment with the mechanism of capitalism, an economic system that subordinates not only women to men but all others or difference such as nature to identity and culture. The idea of a productive and irreversible power is a false power that clings to life, identity and exclusion, therefore undermining a feminist position that aims at eradicating oppression.

Whether or not Baudrillard's assessment is fair could also influence a feminist aesthetics of nature. Within Irigaray's writing there is a sense of indecisiveness regarding nature and essentialism; but in one way we can understand her as suggesting nature is one of bodily and sensory appreciation, thus supporting Berleant's active engagement theory, in an attempt to undermine a masculine theory of aesthetics.

Ecofeminism as Essentialism and Non Essentialism

Ecofeminism explicitly links nature and woman in a historically, patriarchal connection, and is centered closely to sociopolitical activism and an environmental ethic. Similar to Irigaray, ecofeminists such as Noel Sturgeon and Karen Warren are usually associated though not exclusively as essentialists. Ecofeminism also aims for subverting power, and from the standpoint of Noel Sturgeon a definition of ecofeminism should remain flexible and able to accommodate discontinuities and contradictions, in numerous kinds of action, including "the deployment of symbolic resources, shifts in identity construction, and the production of both popular and scholarly knowledge – as well as direct action, civil disobedience, strikes, boycotts, demonstrations" (Sturgeon 4). An ecofeminist's project is to ask questions; how do we let nature speak on its own terms? How does nature speak? How do women listen, interpret, and understand nature differently than men?

Ecofeminist challenges are addressed in the work of R. King who writes; "Both strands of ecofeminism, essentialist and conceptualist presuppose that environmental ethics will benefit from creating theoretical space for human relations to nature, personal lived experience, and the vocabulary of caring, nurturing, and maintaining connection" (King as quoted by Johnson, 110). In attempting to erase boundaries between culture and nature ecofeminists ask the question to what and how should an ethic of care be directed?

The question of care for nature can also be associated with the work on aesthetics and environmentalism Stan Godlovitch conveys in *Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics*. Godlovitch in this essay outlines two prominent aesthetic theories of nature: Allen Carlson's cognitive science model and Mark Sagoff's affective-reverential view in contrast to Godlovitch's own view of an acentric aesthetics and acentric environmentalism. Godlovitch opposes both Carlson's and Sagoff's views as Godlovitch is concerned with nature as nature, on its own terms, free of any human categories such as Carlson's scientific categories or Sagoff's reverence.

Godlovitch's view is similar to Irigaray in that he perceives he is giving nature a chance to exist on its own terms, and therefore rejecting most essentialist feminist positions. Godlovitch nonetheless uses traditional vocabulary such as 'objective mystical' that reinscribes nature and woman's inescapability from patriarchal language.

For instance; “It is that nature –the aloof, the distant, the unknowable, the Other – that eludes the filters of cognitivist and affectivist attempts at contact” (Godlovitch 120). Doubtless, essentialist ecofeminists couldn’t commit to an acentric position, even if it might offer the ‘theoretical space’ King is suggesting ecofeminists need, but Godlovitch’s patriarchal categorization of “aloof space” would nevertheless perpetuate the binary of same and other, the very criticism he makes of Carlson and Sagoff, and therefore keeps ecofeminists from any practicality for action or aesthetic participation.

Mark Sagoff’s aesthetic theory is more compatible with essentialist environmentalism and associates woman’s body and the protection of nature’s body. Mother Earth. Sagoff, “draws upon respect, regard, reverence, affection, and love. The unconditional regard flows from an inner attachment to the earth” (Sagoff as quoted by Godlovitch, 118). It is the role of ecofeminists (whether man or woman) to protect nature from the hands of a mechanical, technological and destructive patriarchal order. In protecting nature Karen Warren, like Sagoff, is concerned with care. Warren advocates a love of difference from a direct personal experience of rock climbing. “The ethic Warren then develops as ecofeminist is characterized by ‘loving perception’ and an attitude of respect and care in contrast to the ‘arrogant perception’ and attitude of domination and conquer” (Payne, 142). Nature’s openness and freedom might give women a unique space for appreciation and love as suggested by Sagoff and Warren.

An affirmation of the body is also shared by Hélène Cixous who according to Ecker feels feminine writing is “writing the body” (18). Cixous advocates a position of cooperation, or proximity, similar to loving perception rather than conquering. Women writing for women. “It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system” (Cixous, *Utopias*, 253). Can Cixous’ thought be extended to an aesthetics of nature?

Cixous, like Irigaray attempts to avoid an equation with essentialism, and woman’s biological body as destiny but Cixous’ feminine language, like Irigaray’s makes her position ambiguous. Would such an aesthetic appreciation be one of sensory immersion focusing on the ‘fluidity’ of nature and likewise the ‘fluidity’ of woman’s body? Cixous’ view like Irigaray’s affirms the senses, and the importance of touch, rejecting Cartesian “masculinization of thought ... characterized as an active flight from the female, based on mathematical measurement and objectivity” (Susan Bordo and Karl Stern as quoted by Broude, 146). My concern here with Cixous’ focus on a female desire is whether or not women would even want a female desire if desire is a masculine value. Hopefully as I demonstrated earlier this ecofeminist position although accurately points to the exclusion of women, brings other problems to the surface such as an ideology of power in rethinking the feminist subject and body.

Non-essentialist ecofeminists on the other hand are more sympathetic to the patriarchal model of aesthetically appreciating nature. Conceptualist feminists like Sherry Ortner aim to distance women from nature; woman’s relationship to nature is not different than man’s, and therefore, woman should no longer be considered or correlated as the other of identity or sameness. “Ortner argues that because culture devalues

nature, women, in order to achieve equality, must distance themselves from the representations, institutions, and practices that position them as 'closer' to nature" (Alaimo, 9). The critique of man as identity and subjecthood and woman as other and object is brought to light best in the writings of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*.

De Beauvoir is concerned with challenging the social link of the feminine with woman and the masculine with men that can be traced back to the tradition of Aristotle. De Beauvoir's question is how the sex/gender link can be subverted? If culture is superior to nature and nature is more feminine than masculine, then women must distance themselves from the nature that dooms them to an inferior position. This brief outline leads me to my last discussion of a more detailed analysis of non-essentialism or the conceptualist position in feminist theory.

Non-Essentialism and the Aesthetics of Nature

Fueled by a desire to combat the essentialist position non-essentialists seek to distance women as a natural sexual category from the category of nature. The non-essentialist position focuses on the dangers of imaginative potency by the western patriarchal world and "the way nature has been entangled with ideologies of race and gender" (Alaimo 1) and "the garden of someone else's imagination" (Kolodny as quoted by Alaimo 1). For the purposes of an aesthetics of nature the non-essentialist position would be cautious in embracing Emily Brady's position in her article *Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*.

Brady writes; "We need an approach that allows for the freedom, flexibility, and creativity demanded by nature *qua* aesthetic object. The complexity of nature provides the possibility of rich and rewarding aesthetic experience, but such an experience is made as much by the object as by the perceiver" (Brady, 159). For Non-essentialists the non-feminization of the object, and the non-masculine perceiver would both be important because of the imagined relationship between women and nature. Nature as a free space, devoid of any confining concepts, values and roles offers a site for feminist cultural critique, a signifier without the signified or referent.

For non-essentialists historical examples of nature characterized as a woman are not difficult to come across in art or any discipline. Nature is often viewed as a mother, woman's historically primary domestic role, and Greek mythology is just one example. It is the essentialist's aim, however, to transform woman's and nature's interdependent domesticating role as mother (Demeter), virgin (Artemis), whore (Aphrodite), and butch (Athena). "Defining woman as that which is mired in nature thrusts woman outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality and agency" (Riley as quoted by Alaimo 2). Associating woman and nature uphold the very laws of nature that subordinate women to men and nature to culture and unequal power relations.

As De Beauvoir writes: "woman is related to nature; she incarnates it: vale of blood, open rose, siren, the curve of a hill, she represents to man the fertile soil, the sap, the material beauty and soul of the world" (De Beauvoir, 281). If men mark their subjectivity by separating themselves from the domestic and the natural world, then women must do the same. Women's biological activities such as birth, give women the inferior position of being viewed as closer to nature than society. This position follows

the path of Descartes and doesn't aim at redefining nature, but rather redefining woman in an equal attempt to transcend matter and bodies as male.

Therefore, non-essentialists assert woman is a product of culture not nature, and must enter into culture in order for feminist change and liberation. Monique Wittig extends De Beauvoir's distinction between sex/gender as social constructions to say: "Even the category of sex is not natural, but political and economic...we have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the *idea* of nature that has been established for us" (Wittig as quoted by Alaimo 5). A non-essentialist position seems compatible with Carlson's scientific cognitive model, which aims to provide an objective criteria for making appropriate aesthetic judgments about nature. As the art world has specific categories, guided by Kendall Walton's Institutional Theory of Art, scientific knowledge can guide our categories for appreciating nature. But there is also the danger of allowing science to keep informing our experiences through a masculine model predicated on feminine inferiority, and patriarchal language such as so called objective judgments, and rationality.

It is the historical passivity of woman and nature that allows for a masculine aesthetic appreciation to take place at all. Jane Flax refers to this as "the desire to know...the desire to dominate" (Flax as quoted by Alaimo 144). Woman becomes dangerously close to becoming the other (woman to man) to the other (man to nature). We must be careful not to confuse what we appreciate in the object to be natural as opposed to what we appreciate in the object as cultural, therefore the situated position of the knower must be revised and her relationship to the object if we would even want to call it that, for such knowledge.

In respect to an aesthetics of nature are we to follow the advice of Shulasmith Firestone who does write on a feminist aesthetics of art: "It would take a denial of all cultural tradition for women to produce even a true 'female' art" (Weckmueller, 30) Firestone's claim is that the norms and standards for aesthetic appreciation are man's not woman's. There is a danger in attempting to unify nature and art such as Berleant's unified theory, as men have traditionally produced art, since women and nature have been the inferior objects for this art.

Although the conceptualist position aims at distancing women it does not escape its own share of problems. Often feminists such as Braidotti have critiqued this position as reaffirming the dichotomous relationship between culture and nature that grounds essentialism because nature is everything that culture is not. This position also leaves nature object, and inferior to culture, a similar position woman has found herself historically.

Conclusion

My conclusion after discussing both feminist positions, essentialist associated with Irigaray and non-essentialist associated with De Beauvoir is that there is not a place for feminism within the aesthetics of nature as both feminist theories attempt to rethink the social/nature divide. If there is to be a place for feminists within the aesthetics of nature it will arise from a radical rethinking of essentialism and aesthetic theory including the subject, methods of appreciation and the objects for such appreciation. Jane Haraway writes; "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge,

not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object” (Haraway as quoted by Alaimo 148). Berleant’s active engagement theory comes closest to Haraway’s thought as a challenge for feminists and non-feminists to rethink aesthetic theory and how women and nature can be understood differently than as defined by masculine parameters. Although, I argue that there doesn’t seem to be an adequate place for feminists within an aesthetic theory of nature at this time, there does seem to be a space for a feminist ethics of care towards nature as suggested by Warren whose thoughts address many of the issues and challenges feminists face and might lead to a future rethinking of an aesthetics of nature.

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