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# Feminist Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Feminist philosophy has taken too long to engage seriously with aesthetics and has been even slower in confronting natural beauty in particular. There are various possible reasons for this neglect, including the relative youth of feminist aesthetics, the possibility that feminist philosophy is not relevant to nature aesthetics, the claim that natural beauty is not a serious topic, hesitation among feminists to perpetuate women's associations with beauty and nature, and that the neglect may be merely apparent. Discussing each of these possibilities affords a better understanding of, but none justify the neglect of natural beauty in feminist aesthetics.

## KEYWORDS

Environmental aesthetics, gender, feminist perspectives, Hepburn

## I.

In 1966, Ronald Hepburn brought our attention to the neglect of natural beauty in contemporary aesthetics in his influential essay, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty'.<sup>2</sup> In it Hepburn not only notes the neglect of natural beauty in contemporary aesthetics, but also diagnoses its causes, bemoans its negative consequences, and discusses the positive effects that might follow from taking natural beauty seriously as a philosophical topic. Now, half a century later, natural beauty is given much more careful and frequent attention in philosophical aesthetics, largely due to Hepburn's work, and it is no longer the case that most major anthologies of aesthetics fail to include any work on natural beauty. Of course, this is not to say that environmental aesthetics is as centrally located as it ought to be in philosophical aesthetics; alas, to too many philosophers it seems the field of aesthetics is *still* defined as 'the philosophy of art' or 'philosophy of criticism'.

Examples of recent anthologies that omit environmental aesthetics as a topic are easy to come by and include *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, edited by Carolyn Korsmeyer (Wiley, 1998) and *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* edited by Mathew Kieran (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005). Yet, there is still cause for celebration and optimism, for despite some continued neglect, many contemporary aestheticians appreciate the theoretical and practical seriousness of the topic of natural beauty, as is evidenced by recent aesthetics anthologies that do include studies of natural beauty and other areas of interest to environmental aestheticians, including *Aesthetics*, edited by Susan L. Feagin and Patrick Maynard (Oxford, 1998); *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology*, edited by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Wiley, 2003); and *Arguing About Art*, 3rd edition, edited by Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (Routledge, 2004).<sup>3</sup> In addition, several single-authored texts devote some attention to environmental aesthetics and natural beauty. For example, Roger Scruton's recent book *Beauty* (Oxford, 2009) includes a chapter on natural beauty; Thomas Heyd's *Encountering Nature: Toward an Environmental Culture* (Ashgate, 2007) deals with important issues in nature appreciation and environmental art; and Noël Carroll's collected essays in *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, 2001) include two pieces on nature appreciation in the section entitled 'Alternative Topics'.

There are also numerous anthologies and single-authored texts today that deal primarily, even exclusively, with environmental aesthetics and natural beauty. The first half of Carlson's *Aesthetics and the Environment* (Routledge,

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2002) is devoted to natural beauty and related topics. (Of course, this is no surprise as he is the philosopher responsible for authoring the dominant model of nature appreciation with which the rest of us continue to contend.) To name just a few more single-authored texts on natural beauty, there are: Ronald Moore's *Natural Beauty* (Oxford, 2008); Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson's *Functional Beauty* (Oxford, 2008); Emily Brady's *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003); Arnold Berleant's *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Ashgate, 2005) and his earlier *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Temple, 1992); and Yrjö Sepänmaa's *The Beauty of Environment: A General Model for Environmental Aesthetics* (Environmental Ethics Books, 1993). Indeed the field of environmental aesthetics is a thriving subdiscipline in aesthetics today and increased attention is being given to natural beauty, which is, of course, good news.

## II.

However, although philosophical attention to natural beauty has increased dramatically since Hepburn wrote his groundbreaking essay, natural beauty continues to be neglected in another area of philosophy: feminist philosophy. Scanning contemporary texts in environmental aesthetics one finds treatments of issues bringing science, art, epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, environmentalism, religion, pragmatism, history, politics and existentialism to bear on natural beauty and other issues in environmental aesthetics. What one does not find are feminist studies in natural beauty and environmental aesthetics. Interestingly, when feminist philosophers do confront environmental aesthetics, they are much more inclined to discuss the sublime than the beautiful. This is undoubtedly due to the gendered history of the sublime, as many philosophers have explicitly argued or implicitly assumed that women are less able or unable to fully appreciate the sublime. Given the association of the sublime with intelligence, culture, freedom and strength, analysing the gendered assumptions that underwrite the conviction that women are not well-suited to appreciate the sublime is certainly a very worthwhile project. On the other hand, women have always been associated with the beautiful and with nature, and usually not in welcome ways. In fact, feminists have worked hard to undermine these associations.

A quick survey of some representative environmental aesthetics texts makes the point. Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson's *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (Broadview, 2004) and Carlson and Lintott's *Aesthetics, Nature, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty* (Columbia,

2008) contain no studies of feminist aesthetics; indeed, the word ‘feminist’ doesn’t appear in either book’s index. As for single-authored texts, none of the texts mentioned above make sustained inquiry into feminist aesthetics or into what the field of feminist philosophy might disclose about environmental aesthetics.

The neglect I am worried about is evidenced not only in environmental aesthetics texts but also in feminist philosophy texts, for feminist philosophers also fail to deal sufficiently with natural beauty in their venues. Another quick survey makes the point. Despite publishing three relevant special issues, one on ‘Feminist Aesthetics’ edited by Carolyn Korsmeyer and Hilde Hein in the summer of 1990 with a subsequent text entitled *Aesthetics in a Feminist Perspective* (Indiana University Press, 1993), another on ‘Women, Art, and Aesthetics’ edited by Peg Brand and Mary Devereaux in the autumn of 2003, and one more on ‘Ecological Feminism’ edited by Karen Warren in the spring of 1991, *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* has yet to publish any articles on natural beauty or even environmental aesthetics more generally since its start in 1983. Neither does the ‘Feminism and Traditional Aesthetics’ special issue Peg Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer edited of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (48:4) in 1990 or the subsequent text based on it published by Penn State University Press in 1995 include any work on environmental aesthetics.

Books in feminist aesthetics follow this same trend. Carolyn Korsmeyer’s *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2005) does not discuss natural beauty, focusing primarily on issues in the philosophy of art, the politics of aesthetic taste and the practice of art, and the gendered sublime. Peg Brand’s edited text, *Beauty Matters* (Indiana University Press, 2000) contains no discussion of natural beauty, neither, I believe, does her forthcoming *Beauty Revisited* (forthcoming from Indiana University Press). Ryan Musgrave’s forthcoming volume, *Feminist Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art: The Power of Critical Visions and Creative Engagement* (Springer) includes two feminist essays in environmental aesthetics, but these are on the sublime and artistic representation, not beauty.

Feminist aestheticians are doing important work, grappling with social, political and ethical issues in the philosophy of art, but they have yet to arrive at a full engagement with environmental aesthetics. Environmental aestheticians are likewise doing important work as they confront aesthetic issues at the intersection of theory and practice in philosophical matters that are purely aesthetic and also those that are metaphysical, ethical and political. Environmental aestheticians have yet to explore feminist philosophy in detail and feminist philosophers have yet to explore fully explore environmental

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aesthetics, in particular, natural beauty. Of course, not all philosophers are competent to discuss feminist aesthetics and it is to their credit that they do not simply appropriate piecemeal what might sound fashionable in order to appear more inclusive and interesting; however, this point raises two other issues: why aren't more aestheticians competent in feminist philosophy and why aren't those who are competent in feminist philosophy exploring environmental aesthetics, especially natural beauty?

## III.

Feminist philosophy has taken too long to engage seriously with aesthetics and it has been even slower in confronting environmental aesthetics in general and natural beauty in particular. Having duly noted the neglect of natural beauty from a feminist perspective, it is worth our time to consider some reasons that might explain why feminist aesthetics does not focus, at least sometimes, wholly and deeply on natural beauty. There are a number of possible explanations worth considering. The fact that feminist aesthetics is a relatively new field of inquiry probably offers a partial explanation of the lack of attention to nature aesthetics. Other possibilities worth considering are whether feminist philosophy may not be relevant to nature aesthetics and whether natural beauty may not be a sufficiently serious topic for feminists. Perhaps feminists are leery about associations with beauty and with nature due to the damage beauty ideals have done to women over the ages and because the history of women's subordination is tied to their associations with nature. Another possibility is that the neglect is merely apparent and feminist work has been done in the field of environmental aesthetics although without being explicitly named as such. As we shall see, although each functions as a partial explanation of it, none of these reasons justifies the neglect of natural beauty in feminist aesthetics.

The most obvious answer to the question of why feminist aesthetics has neglected natural beauty thus far goes a long way towards explaining the neglect: the neglect may be largely due to feminist aesthetics' relative youth as a discipline and the related groundwork of the field that has been being laid over the last twenty years, groundwork that might have been or seemed to be conceptually necessary for inquiries such as those into environmental aesthetics. For reasons that aren't entirely clear, aesthetics and philosophy of art have been late to embrace feminist thought. In their introduction to the special volume of *Hypatia* on 'Feminist Aesthetics' in 1990, Hein and Korsmeyer reflect on this strange phenomenon:

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One might expect that the ‘hard core’ of philosophy that includes metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of science would be the most resistant to feminist incursion, but a powerful feminist critique has made an impact in these areas over the past decade. In other disciplines, particularly those cognate to aesthetics – literature, art history, film theory – feminist perspectives have achieved almost mainstream respectability. The relative lack of a feminist presence in philosophical aesthetics is therefore puzzling.<sup>4</sup>

More than a decade later, in the introduction to their special issue of *Hypatia* on ‘Women, Art, and Aesthetics’, Peg Brand and Mary Devereaux remark on how early work in feminist aesthetics ‘directed philosophic attention for the first time to women’s experiences, including women’s experiences of their own bodies and their sense of themselves as creators’.<sup>5</sup> As is frequent when feminist thought is first brought to bear on an area of inquiry, the initial work in feminist aesthetics focused on rectifying the history and making the field – in its subject matter and its practice – more inclusive of women and others who have been sidelined through the history. As Hein and Korsmeyer put it:

Typically, the process begins with the discovery by women who would be practitioners in a field that women are not only absent but excluded from that field, whether as participants, subjects, or intended audience. Frustrated by this absence, the first impulse of many feminists has been to rectify it by inclusion. With diligent scholarship and creative resifting of evidence, they have found forgotten female writers, artists, scientists, and scholars and given them a place within the conventional canon. Hundreds of ‘lost’ women have been reclaimed in this fashion in a movement parallel to that initiated by other ‘marginal’ groups who are likewise seeking a legitimate place in the annals of history. Feminist aestheticians are thus joining an enquiry that has already established the need to discover and justify women artists and is now facing the analytic task of making clear the grounds for their inclusion.<sup>6</sup>

So we see that one reason feminist aesthetics has yet to deal adequately with environmental aesthetics might have to do with the other work, work that was or understandably seemed foundational, that has been its focus since the 1990s. The fact that the feminist artworld was a strong source of creativity and activism decades before aestheticians fully embraced feminism in their philosophical work also likely made a focus on art more obvious to feminist thinkers.

To some, it probably seems that the reason we have yet to find thorough feminist investigations of natural beauty is that such an investigation will not disclose anything new about natural beauty or environmental aesthet-

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ics. In short, maybe feminist philosophy is not relevant to environmental aesthetics. Some may believe environmental aesthetics is really a gender-neutral discipline, as it studies nature, not art. The presumption here is that whereas art is a cultural enterprise, created, controlled and appreciated by people enmeshed in various power relations and systems of domination, it is appropriately analysed for the various gendered meanings and implications that its process, practice and objects might produce and perpetuate, nature is not human-created or human-controlled, but merely human-discovered and thus is not laden with such cultural, including gendered, baggage. Nature, on this view, is gender neutral. What, therefore, can feminist philosophy disclose about nature aesthetics that traditional philosophy is likely to miss?

Such seeming gender neutrality, however, is an illusion. And faith in that illusion slowed philosophy's progress into feminist theory as well. As Brand and Korsmeyer note, 'philosophy, initially seeming the most "neutral" of disciplines with regard to its significance for gender difference, has an entire new area of studies that reexamines this presumption, revealing deep seated gender dimensions in such basic concepts as rationality and autonomy'.<sup>7</sup> It now seems obvious that there are gendered aspects to these and other basic concepts that once seemed wholly gender neutral and many of these, including rationality and autonomy, are relevant to studies of natural beauty. Moreover, although we might conceive of nature as that which is neither intentionally created nor wholly controlled by humans, we should be cognisant of the fact that the manner and mode through which we discover, categorise and even aesthetically respond to things involves gendered (and other cultural) lenses and might be skewed by the workings of ideologies that privilege certain perspectives (e.g., white male). The two main notions in environmental aesthetics are ripe for gender analysis from a feminist perspective: the conceptions of nature and beauty, for both are gendered concepts with varied gendered associations. In addition, gender analysis of the concepts and relations among scientific knowledge, objectivity, appreciation, appropriate appreciation and taste, just to name a few, would be relevant to philosophical investigation into the aesthetic appreciation of nature. The belief that environmental aesthetics is a gender-neutral field conveys a naivety and, frankly, an embarrassing ignorance of what feminist philosophy has accomplished in other areas of philosophy.

On the other hand, some feminist philosophers might argue natural beauty is not a topic of sufficient importance to divert feminist attention from other matters. Feminist philosophers strive for gender equality and fight domination in all of its forms. It might seem that natural beauty is merely a nicety that, although pleasant, is little more than that and hence should not divert

feminists from the more important tasks that occupy their time and energy. However, as much recent feminist scholarship shows, realms of value are not neatly divisible from one another, but inform and help construct one another. Just as we are aware of how intersections between gender, race and class, for example, affect an individual's experiences under patriarchy, we should be aware that aesthetic, ethical, social and political values affect and help determine one another. If so, then aesthetic value is one more part of the picture that needs to be studied in any attempt to create a more equitable and just world, including the human-to-nature community.

As Yrjö Sepänmaa points out, judging beauty and aesthetics as nothing more than 'high cultural icing' is an error and a very regrettable one at that, for aesthetics concerns largely what it means to live a good life.<sup>8</sup> I believe that the marginalisation of aesthetics within philosophy is due to this error as well and that if philosophers reflected on their own lives and what matters to them in it, they too might realise and investigate the importance of aesthetics, natural and cultural, even if the two are not neatly divisible. Neither aesthetics generally, nor beauty more specifically, is accurately portrayed as trivial. Kathleen Higgins argues persuasively that beauty is undervalued today because it is commonly confused with its 'kitsch competitors'. In her discussion which focuses on human beauty, she says, 'false paradigms of beauty have obscured the fact that human beauty manifests an ideal of balance and health that is neither self-conscious nor a consequence of deliberate effort'. This ideal, not the false paradigms of glamour and flawlessness, Higgins argues, is relevant 'to our personal and cultural well-being'.<sup>9</sup>

Hepburn too reflects on the seriousness with which we can attend to natural beauty in his 'Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature'. Worrying about how natural beauty might stand (or fall) against the 'competing and vociferously promoted values involved in industry, commerce and urban expansion', Hepburn advocates a wide sense of beauty, as including 'the aesthetically arresting, the rewarding-to-contemplation, a great range of emotional qualities, without necessarily being pleasurable or lovable or suggestive of some ideal'.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, he maintains that the way we attend to nature aesthetically can be more or less serious, with the serious end of the spectrum involving, necessarily, self-exploration: 'for the energies, regularities, contingencies of nature are the energies, principles and contingencies that sustain my one embodied life and my own awareness'.<sup>11</sup>

But one might still wonder what feminist theory has to gain by considering natural beauty. In addition to the importance of inquiring on our own terms into an aspect of life that contributes to its value, feminist theory's commitment to the importance of experience, including perceptual and

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sensual experience, can be better informed by investigation into experiences, evaluations, and descriptions of natural beauty. In a discussion of the feminist background of care ethics, Virginia Held conveys the importance of experience, including sensual experience, to feminism:

Feminism is a revolutionary movement. It aims to overturn what many consider the most entrenched hierarchy there is: the hierarchy of gender ... Experience is central to feminist thought, but what is meant by experience is not mere empirical observation, as so much of the history of modern philosophy and as analytic philosophy tend to construe it. Feminist experience is what art and literature as well as science deal with. It is the lived experience of feeling as well as thinking, of performing actions as well as receiving impressions, and of being aware of our connections with other people as well as of our own sensations.<sup>12</sup>

Given the ubiquity of first-hand nature encounters and accounts of nature encounters, including many by women, in such places as diaries, memoirs and professional nature-writing, thinking about natural beauty from a feminist perspective can enrich a feminist take on experience. Being aware of and philosophically reflecting on our sensations among others, without others, within nature, and outside of nature, will better ground any feminist account of the importance and nature of lived experience.

This line of thought is reminiscent of the hierarchical placement of art over that of nature in much aesthetic thought. Maybe we were, maybe still are, convinced of the Hegelian idea that art trumps nature in aesthetic and philosophical importance. As Hepburn notes in his study of contemporary neglect, the philosophical world of aesthetics when he was writing was dominated by an exclusive concern about art in the mid-twentieth century. Today the field of aesthetics has a wider breadth of interest, although the 'centre' still holds onto traditional questions of art's nature and art's value. Feminist philosophy is admittedly and intentionally radically different from traditional philosophy, but it still reacts to and is informed by the tradition. It shouldn't be terribly surprising if the topics of interest to feminist aestheticians should develop and evolve in a similar pattern as did those of interest to traditional philosophical aestheticians. And this is likely be due to similar causes, such as a twentieth-century philosophical penchant for conceptual analysis (and the related focus on the definitional project of saying precisely what art is), the dominance of certain theories of art and standards of aesthetic excellence, such as expressionism (which, as Hepburn points out, doesn't transfer well to nature appreciation) and formalism (which doesn't sit well

with many feminists), and a seeming demystification of nature through science and technology.

In addition to this philosophical parity of process, there are unique factors influencing the development of feminist aesthetics. Christine Battersby, a feminist philosophical aesthetician who attends to environmental aesthetics to the extent that her work on the sublime has obvious implications for environmental aesthetics, examines the hostility to feminist aesthetics found in philosophy and in the artworld. Like Hein and Korsmeyer, she too notes the puzzling nature of the lagging behind of aesthetics when it comes to fully embracing feminism, noting that given the many debates about the relationship between women and aesthetics, 'it is, therefore, ironic that although the present-day opponents of feminism have been able to grasp that there might be a place for feminist ethics or feminist political theory within the discipline of philosophy, the notion of feminist aesthetics has been found much more baffling and has attracted opposition, even from within feminism itself'.<sup>13</sup> She argues that this hostility is partly due to the influence of Kant and his insistence that aesthetic judgments should be wholly disinterested, that aesthetic judgment 'must abstract from all use value and material value' which doesn't sit well with feminist commitments.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, much work in feminist aesthetics has been devoted to questioning the ideal of disinterestedness and related artistic standards, to arguing that it is unattainable, and to insisting that it in fact serves various interests of patriarchy and other related power systems. So, although the disinterested requirement doesn't usually sit well with feminist commitments, it has captured the critical attention of aestheticians. Admittedly, most of this attention has been on the norm of disinterestedness as it functions in art appreciation, but environmental aestheticians have called the ideal of disinterestedness in nature appreciation into question as well. Critiques of disinterestedness in environmental aesthetics frequently rely on or incorporate feminist insights; thus, they can serve as models for making further inroads into feminist environmental aesthetics.

The irony Battersby remarks on returns us to something I mentioned at the outset of this essay and offers a clue to another reason aesthetics has lagged behind other areas in philosophy in embracing feminism (and feminism in coming to seriously confront aesthetics): this is the too frequent association of women with the beautiful, and the attendant undervaluing of women for this association. Feminist philosophers have scrutinised various beauty ideals and beauty myths, studying, in particular, their gendered natures and the gender biases behind them. Given the burden that beauty places on women it is understandable that feminist philosophers have focused on critiquing

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beauty rather than on celebrating it, whether in art, the body or nature. After all, feminist philosophers have worked very hard to help women to be seen as, well, to be *more than seen* – to be disassociated from beauty, to be freed from beauty ideals. Given that aesthetics is typically related to pleasure and mistakenly only with trivial, idiosyncratically subjective and base pleasures, the feminist hostility to aesthetics as a discipline is, again, not terribly surprising.

Although it's not terribly surprising, it's also not adequately justified. Feminist aestheticians have not shied away from critiquing sexist and racist conceptions of beauty, nor have they stopped short of celebrating healthier, more inclusive, and life-affirming conceptions of human beauty. Examples of such critiques and celebrations can be found in much of the feminist literature mentioned above. In fact, much feminist discourse has to do with redefining the relationships, roles, ideals and expectations to which women are held; consider, for example, feminist critiques of heteronormativity, motherhood, body ideals, genius, and the so-called feminine virtues. Re-examining these matters allows feminists to include women's and other marginalised groups' voices in the debate. As I indicated above, the way we understand natural beauty has normative force in economic, ethical, social and political debates and is influenced by such debates. Feminists should be part of those dialogues.

Most persuasively, the neglect of natural beauty in feminist aesthetics can be partly attributed to feminist ambivalence toward nature. Bonnie Mann provocatively begins her essay 'What Should Feminists do about Nature?' with the following diagnosis:

'Nature' is the historical millstone hung around the necks of women. It is not only such stone, but it has been the heaviest and the most securely tied. If we understand feminism to be first a social movement for the emancipation of women, then we recognize that the question of nature has been the central question for feminism because *the question of nature is the question of freedom for women.*<sup>15</sup>

Mann claims that the historical and political problem feminists have with nature, a problem that results from an awareness that 'nature' has been hung around women's necks for millennia, prescribing answers to us for the great questions, telling us just what we can know, just how what we should act, and even for just what we may reasonably hope,<sup>16</sup> is so intense that it completely distracts us from the other major problem feminist have with nature, the one all living creatures have with nature. Mann calls this the ontological problem of nature, and, following Arendt following Marx,

‘our metabolism with the earth’.<sup>17</sup> We cannot avoid confronting the problem of nature in this sense, for we are part of nature and nature is part of us. Distraction from the ontological problem of nature, she says, ‘results in the persistent ghettoization of feminist thinking about nature around the question of sexual difference’.<sup>18</sup>

‘Nature’ has many senses to a feminist (to anyone, really), and not all are feminist-friendly. As Mann points out, feminists attend to how nature is frequently invoked in conservative attempts to justify the status quo, as in ‘nature made women nurturing, so they should stay home with the children’, or Lawrence Summers’ remarks that innate differences in ability and interest between men and women might help explain, in part, the inequity we find among men and women in science and mathematics.<sup>19</sup> Appeals to nature are likewise made in descriptions of bad behaviour, descriptions that sometimes bleed over into justifications, as, for example, we find in the popular explanations of male sexual aggression on the basis of evolution critically analysed in Martha McCaughey’s recent book, *The Caveman Mystique* (2007).

Feminists often question dualisms, such as, and most forcefully, that between nature and culture, upon which it might seem much environmental aesthetics and studies of natural beauty rest, and the historical association of women with nature. Yet, as Mann argues, the problems nature confronts a feminist with cannot be separated. We must do something about nature because we are ontologically tied to it; while we must also be aware and critical of the associations of women with nature and men with culture. Just as women have been burdened with beauty requirements and it is therefore reasonable to see feminist resistance to celebrations of beauty, women’s subordination has frequently been justified by their association with nature and it is therefore reasonable to see feminist resistance to celebrations of nature.

For this reason, some may think a feminist study of nature aesthetics can only follow a well thought out critique of the relationships between women and nature and an evaluation of the extent to which women should accept, reject, transform or celebrate these relationships. And this very debate rages on among ecofeminists and within feminism more generally. The dualism of nature and culture and the association of women with nature has been a focus of feminists; none the less, feminists have yet, in my opinion, come to terms with the relative importance of environmental aesthetics in understanding and critiquing this dualism and this association. Moreover, if Mann is correct, feminists can’t hope to solve the historical and political problem of women’s association of nature without paying mind to the nature of and proper response to the ontological problem of nature; aesthetics must play a role in this solution. In other words, a feminist study of nature aesthetics

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must not only be informed by but also inform a well thought out critique of the relationships between women and nature and an evaluation of the extent to which women should accept, reject, transform or celebrate these relationships. Given that lived experience and not merely abstract reasoning is the groundwork of much feminist thought, an account of the ontological relationship with nature would be pale and weak without attending to the aesthetic relationships between us and nature.

On a final and important note, to some it might seem that the neglect of natural beauty by feminist aestheticians is merely apparent, as there already is feminist work in this area, although it is not explicitly labelled as such. However, due to a lack of a specific, although not necessarily exclusive, focus on women, the work appealed to is usually not feminist. For example, Aldo Leopold was an environmental thinker who was deeply worried about various forms of domination involved with the human to nature relationship. I think any feminist who is critical of liberal individualistic ideology, and many of us are, would find deep resonance with Leopold's thoughts on interdependence and the importance of relationships between and among humans and the natural environment. In a movement that feminists can respect, Leopold insisted that human beings should take a new position, that captured by the notion of a land ethic, relative to nature: 'a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it'.<sup>20</sup> In a movement that environmental aestheticians can respect, Leopold prioritises aesthetics in environmentalism with his definition of a right act: 'a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community'<sup>21</sup> (emphasis mine). Any environmental aesthetician who wants to underscore the importance of aesthetic value, and many of us do, can find deep resonance with Leopold's inclusion of beauty in the cluster of things that should be considered for contributing to rightness or goodness.

Despite many important feminist and aesthetic themes detectable in aspects of Leopold's thought, I am not willing to consider him a feminist aesthetician, nor even a feminist philosopher. This is not due to his gender, but because Leopold does not work with a conscious focus on women and gender norms, nor with an explicit commitment to feminist thought and to advancing feminist perspectives. I am not faulting him for this; my judgment here is merely descriptive. Nor am I denying that his work offers much that feminists might find of value. One can accomplish much that furthers a movement without being part of that movement. Yet, feminist philosophy is a bona fide sub-discipline in philosophy and just as one is unlikely, without studying the field, to unintentionally make major contributions to analytic

philosophy of mind, one is unlikely to make major contributions to feminist philosophy without relevant study and intentionality. Nonetheless, I would consider Leopold a proto-feminist.

Unlike when Leopold was working, today feminist philosophy is a well-established field and yet is still not one that a philosopher can partake in inadvertently. Of course, the work of some philosophers is more amenable to feminist appropriations and more sensitive to the implications of patriarchy and gender norms than is that of others. Some aestheticians have incorporated feminist insights into their work, but frequently where one does find treatment of feminist and environmental aesthetics in the same text, the analyses often fail to fully inform one another. For example, in her recent book, *Everyday Aesthetics*, environmental aesthetician Yuriko Saito writes that her approach might rightly be considered feminist as her focus is 'the often neglected aspect of our aesthetic life, just as feminist philosophy takes up aspects of our lives that have traditionally been ignored in a serious academic discourse due to their ordinary and mundane nature, such as domestic chores and mothering activities, generally relegated to the female domain'.<sup>22</sup> While she does make some interesting connections to feminist issues in her text, Saito does not thoroughly mine the depths of feminist thought that might be relevant to her project and stops short of aligning her approach with a feminist, or with any, agenda. Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson discuss feminist aesthetics in passing in their recent *Functional Beauty*. Emily Brady's *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* makes passing mention of feminist aesthetics in the context of defending a conception of disinterestedness, but the book does not include a sustained study of feminist aesthetics. Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* deals promisingly with natural beauty but does not do so from an explicitly feminist perspective.

The most promising example of a philosophical aesthetician who takes a consciously feminist perspective on natural beauty in his work is found in the work of Arnold Berleant. Berleant's philosophical work takes experience and context seriously and his views of nature appreciators as participants in constructing the object of appreciation accords with much feminist thinking. And in much of his work, Berleant does incorporate various feminist insights into his environmental aesthetics, but one senses the promise of such insights is only beginning to be understood by him and his readers. So, although the surface has been scratched, even deeply by some, the depths of feminist thought in nature aesthetics have yet to be fully plumbed. Even in my own work as a feminist philosopher who works on environmental aesthetics I have done little more than skim the surface of the ways feminist theory and environmental aesthetics might mutually inform one another. To

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claim that feminist aesthetics has already paid ample attention to natural beauty is to sell feminist philosophy short. Moreover, even if it were the case that Leopold, Berleant, and a few others were working in feminist aesthetics with a focus on natural beauty, which I don't think is an accurate construal of the situation, this wouldn't show that there isn't presently a neglect of natural beauty by feminist aesthetics. In any case, there is certainly more to be said, more perspectives to take, and more issues to unearth than one small bunch of philosophers can accomplish.

## IV.

Thus far I have argued that feminist aesthetics has neglected natural beauty as a topic of philosophical investigation and have explored various reasons for this neglect, none of which justifies it. In the process, I have also made some suggestions for issues on which feminist philosophers might wish to focus in environmental aesthetics. In closing, I would like to focus on the implications of this oversight. In his landmark essay, after outlining the neglect of the study of natural beauty, Hepburn argues as follows:

The neglect is a very bad thing: bad because aesthetics is thereby steered off from examining an important and richly complex set of relevant data; and bad because when a set of human experiences is ignored in a theory relevant to them, they tend to be rendered less available as experiences.<sup>23</sup>

I am convinced that the neglect of natural beauty by feminist aesthetics is a very bad thing; bad because it mutually impoverishes feminist and environmental aesthetics; bad because, as feminists are well aware, when an experience is not given voice, it is taken less seriously and perhaps completely erased. I believe feminists have much to offer by way of interpretation and reinterpretation of our aesthetic encounters in the natural world; these experiences and feminist insights are too important, too valuable, too complex, to be erased.

When feminist aestheticians do not discuss natural beauty, environmental aesthetics misses out also on the edification feminist thought can bring. Feminist philosophy has enriched most areas of philosophy and environmental aesthetics stands to benefit from the insights that can be gleaned from a feminist critique of its commitments, practices, and assumptions. In particular, precisely because feminist philosophers are so aware of and critical of the workings of assumed value dualisms, environmental aesthetics, which *does* make such assumptions in its workings can only benefit from the

increased self-awareness and increased self-critique that feminist perspectives can engender. Without questioning these assumptions, one of which *is* basic in our field – the distinction between nature and culture – we might merely repeat past mistakes and fail to be as progressive as we would hope. Questioning these dualisms, such as that between nature and culture, doesn't necessarily mean rejecting them, but it does necessarily mean understanding them better. Similarly, feminist aesthetics would be enriched by considering a broader scope of inquiry, considering anew how gender and other systems of power infiltrate our aesthetic experiences in the 'natural' world.

In this essay, I have observed a serious neglect in environmental aesthetics, examined its causes, assessed some implications of the oversight, and reflected on the promise of bringing the neglected topic to the centre of issues in environmental aesthetics. Although it seems somewhat odd that it would be this area of philosophy – environmental aesthetics – that would be one of the last to fully embrace feminist perspectives and to benefit from all that feminism could offer by way of edification, insight, and education, I believe that the tensions that exist between feminism and aesthetics and feminism and nature can contribute to the importance of a feminist treatment of contemporary environmental aesthetics, for both feminism and aesthetics. Because aesthetics is necessarily interdisciplinary, and so too are feminist and environmental philosophy, failing to bring these fields to one another, in serious engagement, only impoverishes each from the insights these diverse, interdisciplinary fields can bring to one another. The reasons that help explain why feminist aesthetics may have neglected natural beauty offer ready research topics for feminist aestheticians who might wonder: How can a deeper, more serious, aesthetic appreciation of natural beauty be understood through feminist methodology? How can a more thorough investigation of the aesthetics of nature inform ecofeminism? How does disinterestedness differ as a regulative ideal in the artworld and in the aesthetic appreciation of nature? Should nature be appreciated aesthetically and what does that mean to a feminist anyway? How do race, gender and sexuality inform nature appreciation? How do these differences intersect in political debate over nature? Is the concept of nature gendered? Is women's appreciation and nature writing due to women's association with nature rather than culture?

To my mind, feminist aestheticians *should* take up natural beauty as a topic of focus. The contemporary neglect of natural beauty by feminist philosophers is a gap that must be bridged. But now, I arrive as Hepburn did, at a bit of moralising and I take this, as he did, as 'a sign that this paper has come to its proper end'.<sup>24</sup>

## FEMINIST AESTHETICS

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the group meeting of the International Society for Environmental Ethics at the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, New York City 2009, and I benefited from the feedback, critique, and discussion I enjoyed during the session. I am grateful for all who attended the session and participated in the discussion, especially Emily Brady, Allen Carlson, and Roger Paden. My appreciation is also extended to Isis Brook, the editor of this volume, and two anonymous reviewers for *Environmental Values* for thorough critiques and excellent suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Hepburn 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, all three editions of this text include selections on the aesthetic appreciation of nature.

<sup>4</sup> Hein and Korsmeyer 1990, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Brand and Devereaux 2003, ix.

<sup>6</sup> Hein and Korsmeyer 1990, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Brand and Korsmeyer 1990, 277.

<sup>8</sup> Sepänmaa 1995, 15; See also Eaton 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Higgins 2000, 87.

<sup>10</sup> Hepburn 1996, 65, 66.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Held 2007, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Battersby 2007, 45.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Mann 2009, 79.

<sup>16</sup> Paraphrased from Kant's three great questions: 'all the interests of my reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the three following questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? 3. What may I hope?' Kant [1965], 635 (A805/B833).

<sup>17</sup> Mann 2009, 80.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 80–81.

<sup>19</sup> The complete text of Lawrence Summers' controversial remarks at the 'Diversifying the Science & Engineering Workforce' conference at Cambridge, Massachusetts in January 2005 can be accessed at: <[http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/summers\\_2005/nber.php](http://www.president.harvard.edu/speeches/summers_2005/nber.php)>.

<sup>20</sup> 'Land Ethic', in Leopold 1970, 240.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>22</sup> Saito 2008, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Hepburn 2004, 45.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

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