Visitors' Creative Responses to Protected Landscapes

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Understanding park and protected area visitors can be thought of as another kind of ethnography, that is, finding out about their point of view. In comparison with the Schuster's and Goetsch's papers (this volume), I discuss the perspective of visitors who develop personal connections—both intellectual and emotional connections—with park landscapes, rather than the perspective of members of traditional communities who made connections with park landscapes before they were designated as a park.

Visitors' creative responses to protected landscapes can help them, and land managers, understand the resource and their relationship with the resource. Creative responses can include painting, drawing, writing, singing, and dancing. Park visitors, in all their variety and diversity, have various relationships with protected landscapes. They can have strong ties, associations, emotional bonds, and strong responses that can influence how they respond to land management decisions, for example, whether they support or disagree with proposed management actions. One type of visitor response is painting.

Landscape painting has a strong relationship with parks and protected areas, and can influence personal and community identity. For example, landscape painting influenced the perception and establishment of large western national parks (Belanger 1999; Gussow 1971), and some park units have been established specifically to commemorate and preserve specific artist's work and influence (e.g., Weir Farm National Historic Site). Painting can be used as a vehicle to communicate resource values. For example, between 1937 and 1943, Bandelier National Monument hired Santa Clara Pueblo artist Pablita Velarde to produce over seventy paintings of contemporary pueblo life (Ruch 2000). These paintings, which visitors have viewed over the years, support the major interpretive message that Puebloan occupants didn't "disappear" from Bandelier, but relocated, and that their descendants, who live in neighboring pueblo communities, still consider the park landscape important to the continuity of their culture. Velarde's paintings illustrate the relationship between Puebloan people and their landscapes, and this relationship influences their sense of community identity. These paintings also communicate to monument visitors that the Bandelier landscape plays a role in Puebloan identity, and that this association is an important value of the monument's landscape resource.

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Visitors' paintings can also illustrate relationships, communicate resource values, and influence the painter's and others' sense of identity. My case study of how visitors' responses can reflect their understanding of, and relationship with, a protected landscape, and in turn influence their sense of identity, is a two-day workshop I held at the Ghost Ranch Conference Center in northern New Mexico (Figure 1). During this workshop, a group of ten participants created images that reflected and expressed their relationship with the Ghost Ranch landscape.

Ghost Ranch is closely associated with the life and work of nationally-significant artist Georgia O'Keeffe, and the workshop used O'Keeffe's relationship with this landscape as a reference and for comparison. Ghost Ranch is a privately owned landscape, protected as a conference center and venue for public workshops. The high desert landscape contains multi-colored hills and cliffs, riparian areas, and building complexes. The O'Keeffe house is on the property but is not open to the public.

I developed the workshop as part of my dissertation that focused on Georgia O'Keeffe's relationship with the Ghost Ranch landscape (Cowley 2006). I used concepts from ecofeminist theory to help explore that relationship. The workshop was held over a weekend in May, 2005. I led the ten participants (eight women and two men) through a series of "experience cycles"—cycles of presentation, outdoor creative activity, and group discussion. Workshop activities were both contemplative and interactive. My goal was to facilitate participants' opportunities to explore their relationship with the landscape, using O'Keeffe as a case study. The key question was, "Does gendering the landscape, and our relationship with it, influence our creative responses to that landscape?"

By "gendering the landscape" I mean assigning a gender (feminine, masculine, androgynous) to a landscape, or to a specific landscape feature. For example, using the term "Mother Earth," or characterizing the overall landscape as feminine, is a long-standing, almost subconscious gender-

Figure 1. Ghost Ranch Conference Center landscape (photo by J. Cowley, 2005).

ing of the landscape prevalent within many cultures. Compare this with thinking of the landscape as masculine. This might be unfamiliar and even seem odd. Sometimes, individual landscape features are gendered as masculine. For example, some Puebloan people experience mountains as masculine, and valleys and villages as feminine (Swentzell 1998).

By "gendering our relationship with a landscape," I mean experiencing our interactions with the landscape as gendered, that is, having qualities we associate with feminine, masculine, or androgynous. For example, if we relate to a landscape through our senses more than through cognition—if we feel the landscape more than think about it—and if we associate relating through our senses as feminine, then we might characterize our relationship with that landscape as feminine.

Ecofeminism studies the connection between the degradation of nature and discrimination against women (Warren 1997). Within ecofeminist fiction, landscapes are often portrayed as living beings, as characters in the story, along with humans and animals. Relationships between people and the landscape involve communication between equals (LeGuin 1987; Silko 1977). Within these stories, human characters experience the landscape, and specific places within the landscape, as living entities with whom they can directly communicate. To characterize and describe relationships with the Ghost Ranch landscape, I used three relationship aspects that I derived from ecofeminist thought:

1. The landscape is a living being with voice and volition, so two-way communication with the landscape is possible.
2. We can come to know the landscape, and communicate with the landscape, through our senses.
3. We can develop an intimacy with the landscape, that is, we can identify with and feel close to the landscape, as we can with a person.

Due to their association with ecofeminism, I consider these three aspects of relating with landscape as feminine. This does not mean than men don't and can't experience these ways of relating with landscape; it just means that to me, these aspects are part of a feminine relationship with landscape. A sense of identity can be highly subjective.

During the workshop, I introduced the idea of gendering the landscape and the three relationship aspects, and participants took these ideas with them during the painting exercises. Responding to the idea of gendering the landscape, one workshop participant portrayed the cliffs as a family, i.e. both feminine and masculine. Another participant experimented with separate paintings for masculine, feminine, and androgynous landscapes (Figures 2 and 3). Some participants did not gender the landscape at all; their experience of intimacy with landscape did not involve or depend on an awareness of gender but depended more on an awareness of the landscape being alive (Figure 4). Some felt that thinking about gender got in the way of experiencing the landscape.

When focusing on communicating with the landscape, some participants gendered their relationships, and some did not. For some, communicating with a landscape involved color and touch rather than language. Overall, a gendered approach made their experience more personal and intimate. Most thought in terms of stereotypical gender associations (e.g. enclosed landscape as feminine, vast open landscape as masculine) than experimenting with different associations. And for many, a sense of two-way communication with the landscape needed to include them giving back to the landscape in some way, for example, through some conservation activity. Whether or not they found gendering useful, all participants developed a more intimate relationship with the Ghost Ranch landscape, and for some, this involved allowing the landscape to influence how they thought of themselves, that is, their personal identity. As one participant expressed, "The

Figure 2. Masculine landscape (by S. Otter, 2005).

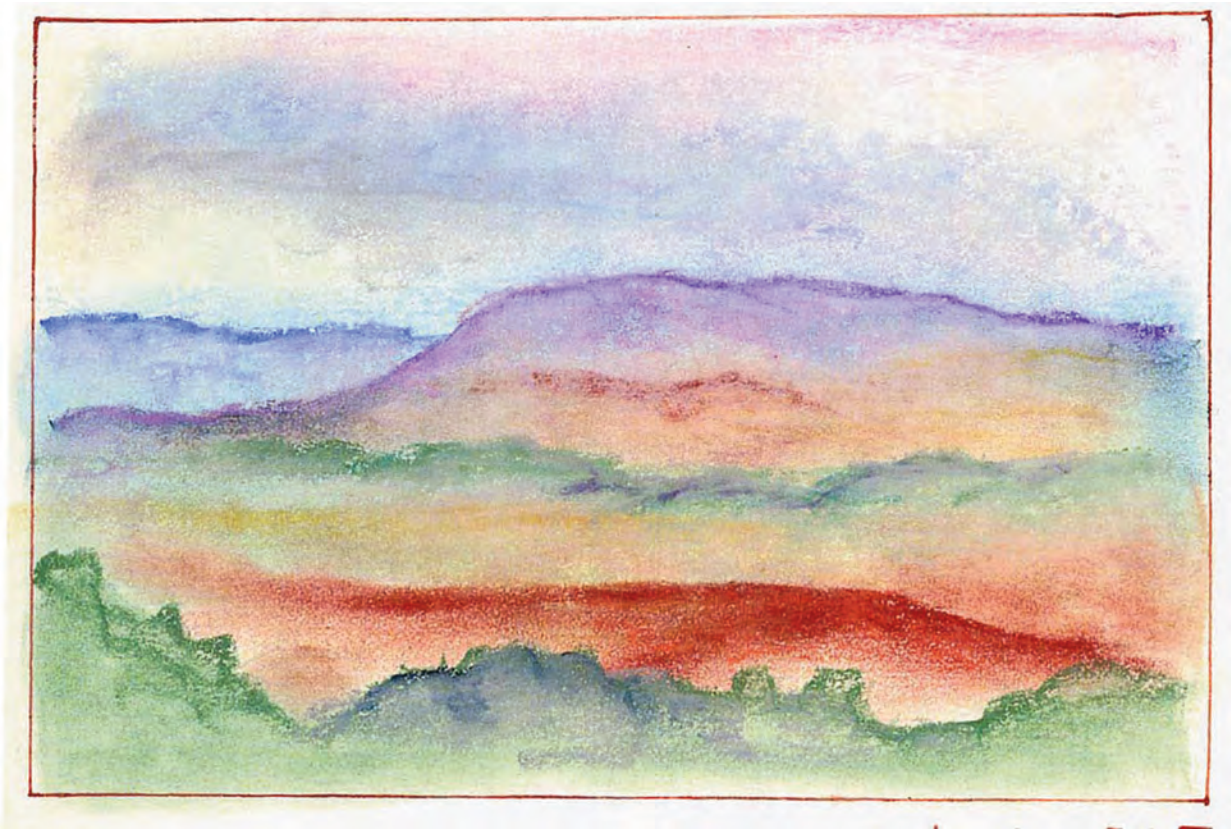

Figure 3. Feminine landscape (by S. Otter, 2005).

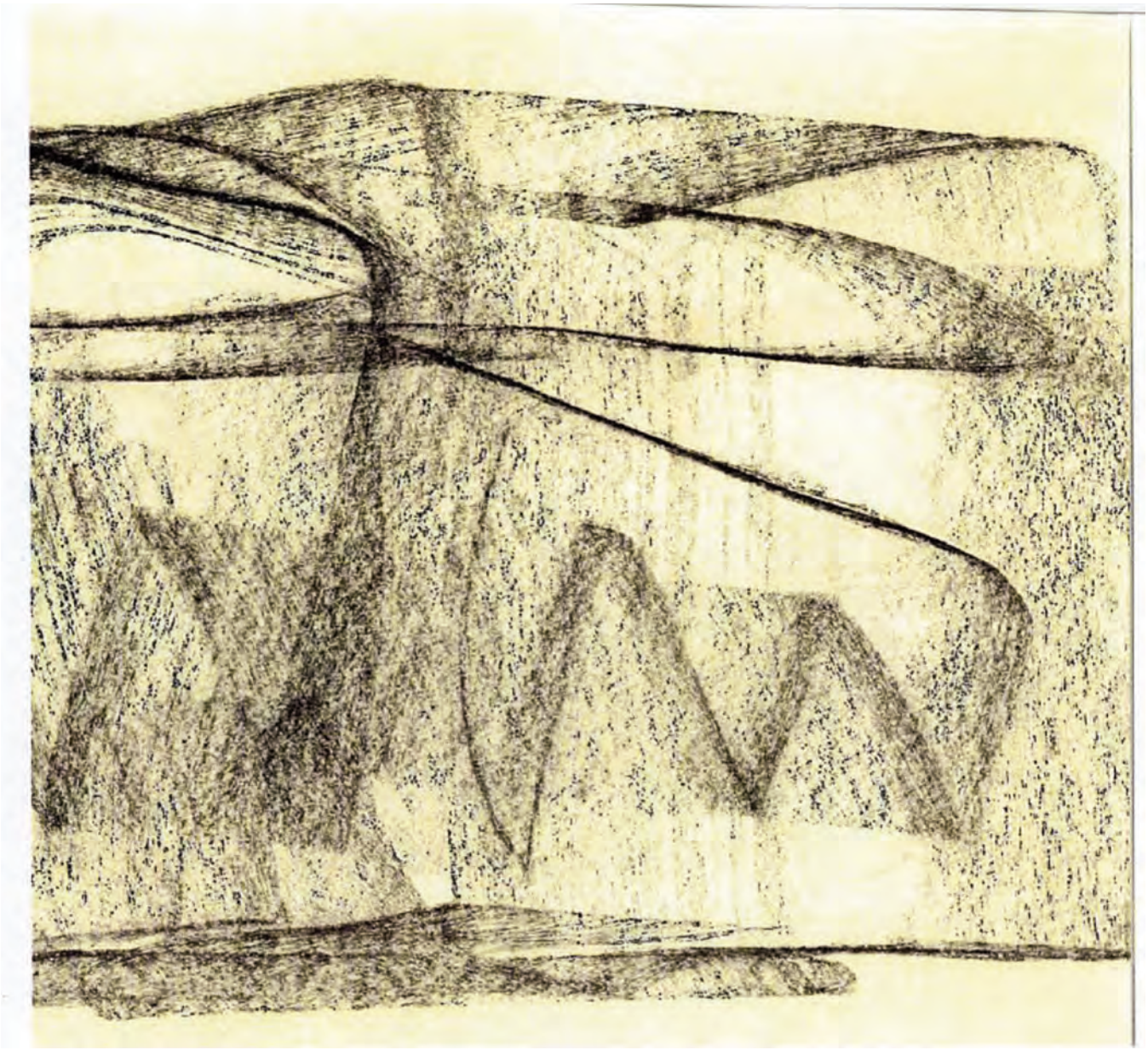

Figure 4. Landscape, not gendered (by M. Munguia Wellman, 2005).

relationship with the landscape captured an essence unattainable with human relationships" (Cowley 2006).

This type of visitor study has several applications to the management of parks and protected areas. Understanding visitors' creative responses to a landscape and to specific places can help managers understand why visitors interpret the landscape in different ways, and what interpretive themes might be of interest. Understanding visitors' ways of relating with landscape can help determine how to design (or not design) interpretive or experience settings. This kind of study can help us understand visitors' community identifications, for example, whether and why they identify as a member of the community of O'Keeffe aficionados, or identify primarily as a member of a community of painters. And, as land managers, we can reflect an understanding of visitors back on ourselves. For example, we can ask ourselves, how might our own personal relationship with a landscape (gendered or not) influence our management decisions?

This previously published material represents my dissertation research, and does not represent the policies or views of the National Park Service.

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