Cult Stud of Sci Educ (2015) 10:215–227
DOI 10.1007/s11422-014-9644-6

Synesthesia and the phenomenological experience: implications for ecological mindfulness and beginning scholars in science education

Rachel A. Luther

Received: 28 September 2014 / Accepted: 28 September 2014 / Published online: 15 October 2014

Abstract Phenomenological experiences based on an openness to the synesthesia of natural environments are a powerful pathway to the development of erotic relationships with and within a place. These relationships are beneficial for beginning scholars and those taking new jobs who find themselves adapting to a new place and career. First, I describe the value and formation of erotic relationships and how they can be constructed through synesthesia and the phenomenological experience through my understanding of the ocean Other. Second, I describe how I have used mindfulness and lived experiences in the natural world to mediate the demands of being a new faculty, and how these provide a pathway to develop and foster relationships that are mutually beneficial and conserving. Among other sustaining qualities, mindfully experiencing natural phenomena reduce stress and increase mental function and emotional well-being. These experiences also connect us with the larger community, where we gain a sense of belonging, more readily establish roots and reasons for care of the Other that sustains us.

Keywords Ecological mindfulness · Synesthesia · Phenomenology of place · Science education · Marine science education

Introduction

My alarm rings. I am startled out of my slumber. I roll over and slightly open my eyes, never ready for the sun just beginning to peak in through my window. I turn off my alarm and remember why I set it: it is time to run. I lie back and stretch my arms over my head,

M. Mueller and D. Greenwood, Editors for Special Issue on Ecological Mindfulness and Cross-Hybrid Learning.

R. A. Luther (✉)
University of Southern Mississippi, Long Beach, MS, USA
e-mail: rachel.luther@usm.edu

roll back to my side and reel my legs onto the floor. With each movement, I begin to gain momentum, and the slightest feeling of electricity passes through me. I dress quickly, grab my keys, and close the door quietly behind me, careful not to wake my family. This time is personal, instinctual, animal. My feet hit the pavement, and I wind through the barren streets of a city I barely know. Each time, I try to take a route that I have never run before, to learn the various paths that inevitably lead me south. My body complains this early, but I am motivated by a desire I cannot deny. So I keep running. With each stride, the scent of salt in the air grows. I fight the resistance of the increasingly sandy streets. Just when I think my body will not go another step, I am greeted by the slow and steady allure of the Gulf of Mexico. To my right, the sky is still and sleepy. To my left, the sun has begun its happy ascent. I turn left to chase the sun down the beach, observing the unassuming wave action as I go. I glance up to take in the magnificent streaks of colors in a sky I never realized could be so big (Fig. 1).

The sun is already warming, shooting sparks across the water's surface, and the ocean beckons to the new day in a rhythmic whoosh and undulating recession. I turn around and run west, grateful for the heat now creeping up my back. On my run home, I notice a dozen brown pelicans, some resting on the skeleton of a pier like many others along this coast, most likely shattered in Hurricane Katrina. Others glide above the water in search of breakfast. When I reach a street that will lead me home, I stop and walk down to the water's edge. I stoop down and trace my fingers in the sand, overturning shells, and disturbing the occasional hermit crab. I stare into the sea for as much time as I can allow before returning home to prepare for a day of work. I close my eyes and inhale the brine deeply, allowing restfulness to pass over my body. I stand, turn my back to the ocean, and run home.

I drive along the beach to work. Again I notice the pelicans (Fig. 2). In my lifetime, I have seen an occasional pelican, but never so many in one place. I find them fascinating, and as I learn more about them, I begin to wonder about our common ties. Brown pelicans are non-native to Mississippi, where I have recently taken up my residence. They breed more commonly on the Gulf coast of Louisiana and Texas and are even considered endangered in Mississippi. Yet each day I find them, sometimes in squadrons of sixty or more, congregating along this shore and feasting from these waters. As non-natives, I wonder what brings them back to this shore. Surely the waters of Texas and Louisiana are just as plentiful and alluring. As I reflect on this, I often consider my own journey to this coast.

The phenomenological experience

> Let's go swim tonight, darling & Once outside the undertow Just you & me & nothing more
> If not for love I would be drowning I've seen it work both ways, but I am up Riding high amongst the waves
> I can feel like I
> Have a soul that has been saved //Riding high amongst the waves
> (excerpt from Amongst the Waves, Pearl Jam 2009)

Like the brown pelican, I am also a non-native to Mississippi. I was born and raised in northeast Ohio, a place much different culturally and physically from the Mississippi Gulf coast, and yet, I mindfully chose this place to work and live. What brought *me* here and

Fig. 1 Morning run with a view, Gulf of Mexico (Luther ©2014)

Fig. 2 Pelicans on a broken pier, Gulf of Mexico (Luther ©2014)

sustains me in this place? To fully consider this, let me take a step back. When I was interviewing for faculty positions, I was looking for something specific and was simultaneously unaware of my quest. On my first trip to interview at an institute of higher learning, I left the airport just as the sun was setting. A college student was sent to pick me up and take me to the hotel. He was incredibly hospitable and, despite how dark it had gotten, offered to take me on the scenic route to get a better feel for the beauty of the city. Although I had looked on the map before my arrival, I was shocked to see how close the university was to Lake Superior, and even more excited to see that my hotel was situated just a few steps from its bank. My driver left me at the hotel, and I put my bag on the bed and looked around. I was first drawn to the window, wondering if my room faced the lake. It did. Within minutes, I found myself standing at the edge of Lake Superior on the most blisteringly cold evening. I told myself I would walk the lake for just a few minutes before

heading back to my hotel room to mentally prepare for the grueling interview process that followed the next day. An hour and a half later, nearly frozen, I wandered back to my room. I went straight to bed feeling more prepared for my interview than I could have felt preparing in any other way. Perhaps it was the biting fresh air, the moon shimmering brightly across the lake, or the quiet stillness all around me, interrupted only by the sound of the lake extending greetings back and forth across the shoreline.

Days later, I found myself in another college town, on another city tour, standing atop a bluff, looking down over the Mississippi River in awe. I had witnessed the Mississippi River as it flowed into the Gulf of Mexico, but this was my first time observing the meandering channels of the northern Mississippi River. It was characteristically much different up north. I am reminded by my work to advocate for our youth, particularly those in landlocked places, to learn more authentically the role freshwater systems play on our oceans, but now, facing the mighty Upper Mississippi River I develop a whole new appreciation for this relationship. Hours later, after I returned to my hotel for the night, I walked down to the river and then along its bank. I watched as thick, large chunks of ice floated by, and I felt a twinge of jealousy for their voyage (Fig. 3). I imagined what it would be like to jump on one and take a trip down the river to its final melting place. And further still, as it becomes liquid carried down to warmer climates and eventually into the sea. The things I could experience from that perspective—one with the river!

A week passed. I drove my rental car into another college town, over a bridge above the Saint Lawrence River. On a break from my interview, I walked down to the river that connects the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean and sat on a nearby bench. Birds were chirping merrily and flying overhead, a spider spun a web on the bench to my left, and the lake murmured from below. It was still quite cold, but because it was one of the first nice days in weeks, I noticed more and more people join me down by the river. They smiled as they walked their dogs or played with their kids, taking pictures, or reading a book on a blanketed ground. Lovers held hands and friends linked arms, and there was a general sense of happiness and wellbeing. I couldn't help but wonder if what drew me there also moved others to attend to the muddy banks of this river. I began to realize that my unknown quest in finding a suitable academic environment or workplace was to discover myself embedded in these phenomenological experiences with the ocean and these aquatic systems that lead to the sea. I knew that despite any amazing employment opportunity, I would not be happy and whole without what I had experienced. At the same time that universities were interviewing me, I was, in a sense, paying homage to the natural areas, trying to determine my place within them. After receiving several job offers, I eventually chose a position on the Gulf coast. I was led to this coast in much the same way that my visits with the rivers suggested a final resting place in the ocean. I had already begun developing an erotic relationship with the Gulf of Mexico more than a decade earlier as an undergraduate research scientist on a research cruise. Now, as a new faculty, I wonder if perhaps these types of erotic relationships are powerful in theory, as the phenomenological experiences here have helped me tremendously in dealing with the various stresses of a junior faculty person. I will return to this point later. First let us address what is meant by erotic relationships.

My erotic ethic is based on the work of Simone de Beauvoir (2011), who explains that we are erotic embodied beings, and as such, we have a responsibility to act for our projects. Rather than focus on negative characteristics, Beauvoir argues that through an erotic ethic, we should work joyfully for transcendence (1948). Working joyfully for our projects challenges us to be more compassionate and ethical. The erotic ethic extends to the Other, as we cannot achieve transcendence without also striving for the freedom of the Other

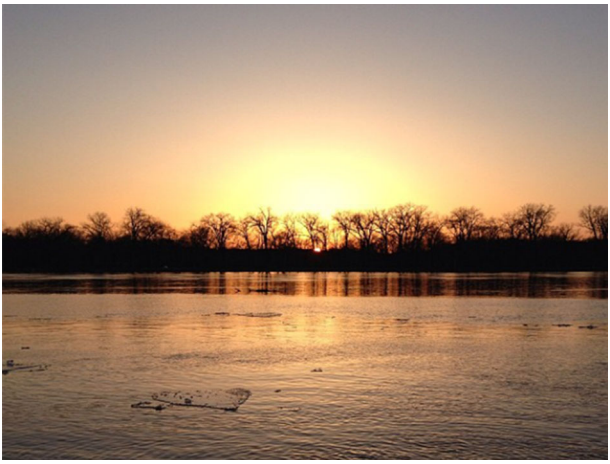

Fig. 3 Ice floats and sun sets, Upper Mississippi River (Luther ©2014)

(1944). If we fulfill our duty to act with generosity for the Other, our project propels relationships into the future. Erotic relationships are then based on mutual reciprocity, where both self and Other benefit. Generosity occurs when one intentionally gives of self for the sake of the Other. It is a "state of emotional intoxication" (Beauvoir 1953, p. 33), in which we see aspects of ourselves in the Other without romanticizing the Otherness or diminishing it to our double. At first consideration, the term "emotional intoxication" seems rooted in romanticism. It is exhilarating, enveloping, and all consuming. Yet, the emotional intoxication Beauvoir refers to is based on a mutual relationship, where both participants lose themselves in the embodied consciousness of their erotic encounter. The intoxication is, therefore, a result of an intersubjective embodied experience, not based on the illogical, unrestricted feelings of an individual. Subsequently, an erotic ethic, and therefore erotic generosity, is only possible when we experience the world openly through the flesh. Further, Beauvoir teaches us to be reliant on ambiguity, not absolutism, in erotic relationships. For example, sex and gender identities assigned through the influence of patriarchy pervert the meanings of desire and subjectivity. This perversion thwarts the conditions necessary for the possibility of erotic reciprocity. As ambiguous, however, we are capable of experiencing the world without objecting or dominating the Other. We can enhance the Other's possibilities instead by recognizing that the Other is responsible for him or herself. In this way, the erotic ethic respects the Other's 'strangeness,' which prevents the Other from further oppression. Becoming allies with the Other, or working with the Other rather than for it, demonstrates our understanding that the Other is important. This alliance with and respect for the uniqueness of the Other is a necessary precursor for erotic generosity.

What is it about the ocean that makes it especially relevant to the development of erotic relationships? In order to not objectify that Other, which I am trying to free (Luther 2013), it is important to acknowledge my understanding that the ocean is especially relevant for me. If asked which natural landscapes other people might consider erotically, the ocean may not come to mind first. Perhaps they may consider the mountains, forests, valleys, or deserts. For me and for many, it has always been the ocean. The siren's call of the ocean is compelling because of the ease of the various pathways the ocean uses to lead us into erotic

relationships. Specifically, we are drawn to these relationships through the inherent *synaesthetic* qualities and ambiguity of the ocean. In spite of myself, the ocean is especially relevant due to the significance of its role on earth and the influence we have on it.

In *The Spell of the Sensuous* David Abram (1996) speaks of synaesthesia, or the perception formed when the senses fuse, functioning and flourishing together. He argues that we can rediscover the earth through the synaesthesia of lived experiences. When experientially considered, perception is an inherently interactive event between the perceiver and the perceived. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues that we are inherently synaesthetic. He explains, despite that, as we develop scientific knowledge, we become less aware of our synaesthetic capabilities. The influence of mental training for scientific practice can easily erode our ability to sense. The scientific quest for logical certainty, to categorize the natural world through cultural neutrality and absolute positivism, errs toward logical deduction, withstanding the exploration of the world through our senses. Through desensitization, the quest for science can sever the full participation of our sensing body with the sensuous environment. When we rediscover the earth, our senses are able to fuse in a way that allows us to experience the thing itself as a central focal point of experience. Our senses are profoundly embedded in the natural landscape. When we rediscover the world with our breathing bodies, the perceived world transforms. In the rediscovered world, much of the unnoticed and overlooked moves from the background to the foreground (e.g., Rachel Carson practiced science this way). This transformation in turn moves the meaningless and desensitized back to highly sensual. Where papers, streetlights, video games, smart phones, and computers lose distinctiveness, birds, blades of grass, and the wind all flourish intensely. When we are in contact with the natural world, our senses become slowly energized and awakened. Through the flesh, we are both sensible and sensitive. In relation to the Other, each of us is both subject and object, both sentient subject and sensible object—ambiguous. If we pick up a fiddler crab, we can feel it crawling across our hand just as the fiddler crab feels us underneath its legs.

A reconnection with any environment in the natural word can reawaken our senses (Fig. 4). The ocean invites this reawakening, which creates a space for an erotic relationship. An erotic relationship with the ocean can further extend to a relationship with other parts of the natural world because of its inherent sensuous qualities. Consider how with the first step on the beach, the ocean captivates the senses. It is almost impossible to notice anything but the ocean: the hot sand slipping between your toes, the sharp shell underfoot, the sea air whipping around you, the scent of sunscreen and the briny sea air, the call of the sea gull, the whistle of the wind and the crash of the wave, the warm sun on your skin, and the taste of salt in the spray. The senses fuse synaesthetically because the ocean demands it. As our senses are rejuvenated, we become open to the ocean-Otherness. This openness allows us to experience the ocean as it is.

We reconnect with our a priori primordial conscious perception and rediscover the ocean through our breathing bodies and flesh. This experience in an erotic relationship with the ocean sparks a deep emotional, physical, and spiritual connection:

> The sea holds a magic for those of us who know her. A magic so simple, pure and powerful it works as an unseen force in our souls. We're drawn to her. The spirit of the sea moves in us as we move within her, undulating folds in pursuit of our peace…we inherently know this to be so. The sea brings comfort, solace, release and escape. The sea brings healing. The spirit of the sea, for some of us, is the very essence of life. (Glendon 2005, p. 70)

Self is embodied as sensual-in-the-flesh experiences are captivated both in the ocean and at the shoreline. The ocean "offers an evocative relationship between our way of being in the world and our particular place in it" (Victorin-Vangerud 2007, p. 170). In *The Awakening,* Kate Chopin's character, Edna Pontellier, believes that the sea speaks to her soul. The "seductive" voice of the sea and Pontellier's lived experiences with the ocean spur an awakening. Pontellier began "to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (Chopin 1993, p. 13). Through an erotic relationship with the ocean, we can accept our situation and strive for our projects. Moreover, we would then be able to recognize the possibilities of the ocean and consider the ocean as a subject, free and worthy of care. This enables/embodies us to act in concert alliance with the ocean for its freedom and protection. Additionally, as mutual reciprocity is an essential characteristic of erotic relationships, this mindful emotional and intuitive response to the synesthesia of the ocean-Other (Luther 2013) should encourage our sustenance as well.

Improved wellbeing through eroticism

People with intimate experiences with the ocean often instinctively associate the good health of their bodies with healthy oceans. There is some pertinent scientific evidence to ground this relationship. There are two major theories of the psychophysiological effect that nature has on humans. The first is Rachel and Stephen Kaplans' (1989) attention restoration theory, which considers mental fatigue. Faculty can experience mental fatigue quite easily because of the increasing pressure put on them to perform: research studies and writing papers, class preparation, assignment grading, being collegial, service to the academic community, all while trying to be social creatures and deal with distractions and their own personal inner dialogue. When people experience mental fatigue, they have lowered competence and functioning efficiency and suffer from attention depletion. Exposure to a soothing natural environment, like the ocean, can restore attention depletion. The second theory is Roger Ulrich's (1983) psychological-evolutionary theory, which focuses on the reduction of stress through exposure to a natural environment. When people undergo a stressful situation, it may disrupt the natural equilibrium of the body, creating a constant fatigue. Because natural environments have the ability to invoke feelings of pleasure and calmness, they have been demonstrated to be very conducive to reducing stress (Han 2010). Although dissident theories, they share a link in the evolutionary theory proposed by some eco- and evolutionary psychologists, which suggests that humans are born with an innate emotional attachment and attraction to the natural environment due to a genetic-encoding tracing back to the beginning of man and the days of hunter and gatherer (Han 2010). As a result, wilderness and natural areas like the ocean provide many psychological and physiological benefits, such as stress reduction, and proving a general feeling of wellbeing. For example, a recent study indicated that people living near the coast are healthier than those living inland. Moreover, among coastal residents, more impoverished communities showed a higher level of health compared to those more economically privileged (Wheeler, White, Stahl-Timmins and Depledge 2012). The authors indicate that this association between good human health and the ocean might be a result of the ocean's ability to reduce stress and the opportunities present at the ocean for increased physical activity. Moreover, interaction with the ocean or other aquatic environments can improve information recollection, problem solving, and creativity. It encourages the development and fostering of imagination and the sense of wonder, which is an important motivator for

Fig. 4 Reawakening the senses, Gulf of Mexico (Luther ©2014)

life-long learning. Exposure to the ocean or other aquatic environments can increase directed attention (Faber Taylor, Kuo and Sullivan 2002), combating fatigue and reduced performance. In addition to building social relationships, enhance their cognitive performance, and improve creative thinking, people "grow emotionally and academically by developing an appreciation for the environment, participating in imaginative play, [and] developing initiative" (Clements 2004, p. 68). Interaction with an aquatic environment can increase confidence, improve decision-making skills, and decrease psychological distress (Faber Taylor and Kuo 2006). These synaesthesic qualities create a prime environment for practicing mindfulness meditation, which reduces stress, ruminative thinking and trait anxiety, and increases empathy and self-compassion (Chiesa and Serretti 2009). The connections between increased health and the ocean abound, and it follows that the enhanced mindfulness and embodiment is highly plausible in ecosystems surrounded by mountains, forests, streams, lakes, or prairie—the key point being the highly erotic Other.

When my grandmother became sick with stage 4 liver cancer 2 years ago, she asked to be taken to her and my grandfather's beach house in New Jersey. They typically spend the cold winter months in Florida, and she learned her prognosis in October. They had only just moved back to Florida from their house in New Jersey a month prior when she went to her doctor for hip pain. In not being able to detect the source of the pain, the doctor sent her for more testing. While the tests did not determine the source of her hip pain, they did reveal the tumor growing on her lungs, which had formed from cancer cells originating in her liver. Her prognosis was grim without treatment—the doctors predicted she would live maybe 2 months. She opted for chemotherapy and radiation, which tied her to their house in Florida. Yet, she continued to ask when she could go back to their house in New Jersey. She did not care how cold it was, she only wanted to be at her place of solace. Months later, she completed her treatment. Her PET scan revealed that the tumor had actually grown despite the intervention. The doctors finally gave her permission to travel. In Florida, my grandma was very tired but still active. She resumed many of her daily activities. When she got to New Jersey, she became increasingly more tired. Many days she slept more than she was awake. My grandma had decided against any further treatment. My family knew her disease was terminal. Considering her prognosis before treatment, when her tumor was

smaller, we began to worry that she would not live to check events off her list of things she wanted to be alive for: the birth of my brother's baby, the second child born to my cousin, another cousin marrying. It was difficult for her to carry out basic tasks, so these events seemed too out of reach, and yet we pushed on. She took walks to the bay with the aid of my uncle. My grandpa drove her to the lighthouse just five miles away. Then she slept for a few days, waking only when her children asked her to wake. Our worry increased. Then, amazingly, with each day she began to spend more time awake. Before long, she was sitting at the table for dinner and walking with her walker, then with only a cane. She was able to check each item off her bucket list, and the seasons changed. Her body needed rest for healing, and the ocean granted a soothing, peaceful environment for an ultimate restful experience. My grandma lived more than a year longer than the 2 months initially given her, actively and happily checking off even more bucket list items, including my doctoral defense and graduation, before she passed away peacefully. What we did for her—what she needed—is not a new concept. There are places of healing on various beaches around the world—the purpose is to allow those that go a place to stay to let the ocean do the natural healing. Places exist to allow children to interact with various aspects of the ocean to recover from emotional traumas, and beachside centers provide a caring and healing environment for those with terminal illnesses. If phenomenological experiences with natural environments, and more specifically here the ocean, provides such things as increased mental clarity, emotional well-being, stress reduction, and increased childlike sensing to those whom have built an erotic relationship with the sea, consider how these opportunities for mindfulness might aid in the adaptation process of living in a new place and adjusting to a new job for those in all stages of academic employment.

Mindfulness and the lived experience

Though the ocean does not consist of flesh in the sense that humans do, it is still 'embodied' through the ways in which humans are consciously aware of the ocean body. It follows that mindfulness is a heightened awareness of an erotic relationship with the ocean, which is manifest through lived experience. Lived experiences with the ocean and "the subcultures in which people reflect upon them, foster understandings of nature as powerful, transformative, healing, and even sacred" (Taylor 2007, p. 925). These ideas, and even 'love' as described by Simone de Beauvoir (1948) bring to mind feelings of peace, happiness, and solace. Surfers, whale watchers, and children playing on the beach on a bright summer's day exemplify these types of lived experiences. However, not all lived experiences with the ocean are associated with positive experiences. Many commercial fishermen, oilrig workers, and beach lifeguards, for example, may find the long hours spent on the water taxing. This may be particularly true as the tedium of a job along the landscape of the ocean may prevent the workers from actually experiencing the ocean for what it is. People employed through the sea may feel further disdain for the ocean as they spend days or weeks away from their family or in bitter cold and dangerous conditions for their livelihood. In other lived experiences, the ocean can be unwelcoming. Consider the beaches of the Gulf of Mexico after the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion. Many of the affected beaches are acclaimed tourist vacation destinations. In the months following the oil spill, the beaches and surrounding ocean water was contaminated with oil.

I received a call from a good friend and colleague 2 weeks after the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion. She asked me to stop by her research laboratory on the way home from class so she could show me something. When I walked into her lab, she rushed me to another room,

where the lab's research refrigerators were kept. She opened one of the refrigerator doors, and it was stocked with tiny glass vials full of water samples from various locations. What I did not expect was oil fumes to completely fill my nostrils when she opened the door. She removed a Mason jar covered with aluminum foil from amongst the vials in the refrigerator. My friend explained that her advisor, a marine photochemist, received an iced overnight package from his brother, then living in Alabama, days after the explosion. Though the public was advised not to interact with the oil-laden water and sediment on the beaches, her advisor's brother could not resist running to the beach with the Mason jar to collect a water sample. When she removed the foil to show me the sample, my body covered in chills. She did not have to remove the lid of the Mason jar for me to consider the significance of what had happened during that explosion. The evidence was in the brown, swirling tar balls and the pungent aroma that lingered long after my friend replaced the jar.

Consider instead the populations of people living along the Indian Ocean, most of who experienced in some way the effects of the tsunami in 2004. Although Japan holds the record for most tsunamis, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami is the most devastating in known history. Within 24 h following the massive tsunami, approximately 150,000 people were dead or missing and millions more were homeless. Imagine the switch in the way that those affected regarded the ocean after the tsunami. Initially, residents along the Indian Ocean may have had a great love for the ocean, or had intense gratitude for the livelihood and sustenance it provided. After losing homes, valuable possessions, community, and loved ones to the ocean that day, it would not be a far stretch to say that many fear the ocean even today. Others may have regrets, a deep hatred, or a sense of longing or loss. Interestingly, in both situations that foster love and care and those that result in negative associations, people gain a new respect for the power and possibility of the ocean. The perceptions formed through lived experiences are reflective of this state of emotional intoxication Beauvoir describes, particularly if we recall that intoxication can be either euphoric or poisoning. Intoxicated, we are able to see the phenomena of the ocean-Other. This mindfulness, or conscious euphoria or perception, can help us develop an erotic relationship with the ocean, which can help both new faculty and those that have been in the field 30 years be successful in a new place.

The conscious euphoria can be elaborated more fully through mindfulness and when embraced as phenomenological experience it is more vibrantly experienced when the perceiver is open to the synesthesia of the natural environment. As Abram explains:

> Such reciprocity is the very structure of perception. We experience the sensuous world only by rendering ourselves vulnerable to that world. Sensory perception is this ongoing interweavement: the terrain enters into us only to the extent that we allow ourselves to be taken up *within* that terrain. (2011, p. 58, emphasis original)

Reflecting back to Arjen Wals' and Jifke Sol's work, in which children used blind rope walking to experience nature without sight, we are reminded that it is possible to recover our ability to sense deeply by simply exercising our senses and being open to the phenomenological experience. With respect to new faculty in academia, first: mindfully seeking phenomenological experiences and developing erotic relationships with natural environments provides a place for healing when needed (Fig. 5). When I leave work, the first thing I see when I turn off the main road of campus is the beach. When I feel successful in some aspect of my job, I observe the twinkle of the setting sun on the waving ocean and the reeds of tall sea grass blowing in the breeze. On nice days, I roll the windows down to feel the balmy ocean air through my hair and catch the scent of brine as it wafts through my car. In between the sound of passing cars, I can hear birds call and people

laughing as they walk on the beach. I initially feel extremely content and justified, and then thankful to the ocean for welcoming me to a place that provides such a safe, engaging, and challenging work environment. On days when I feel down or less successful, when I am desperate to leave campus or even when I wonder why I chose this profession, I catch that first glimpse of the ocean and feel slightly at ease. Sometimes it takes a few minutes during my 20-min drive home for the solace to set in. Some evenings I may even feel resentful—how could that beautiful ocean have lured me to live and work in such a place where I do not feel as if I fit in, or my students do not appreciate how hard I work for them, or there are too many expectations? Angry, I try not to meet its gaze. Despite that, the sun is always setting when I drive west to my house and the sunsets here are more beautiful than I have ever seen. As much as I want to look away, I cannot help but practically drive into these lightshows, and the colors and patterns are so breathtaking that despite my best attempts at stubbornness, I smile. I feel the tension lifting from my shoulders and as I glance to the sea, I am embarrassed for my behavior. Other times, on those frustrating or emotional days, I almost instinctually pull over on to the side of the road, leaving the car and run down to the sea, kicking my heels off as I go. I need that phenomenological experience desperately, animalistically, to recenter and regroup. Like any intimate relationship, there are important reasons we initiate them and reasons we stay in them, even in those times that are less than ideal. While I feel very fortunate to have this academic position, this job has flaws like most. The ocean reminds me, though, of why I chose this profession and this special place in particular, and on those difficult days, I am so thankful for that.

Honing our senses to fully and mindfully embrace synesthesia and seek out phenomenological experiences also provides an avenue for service to the community, which can be an important component to creating a home personally and professionally. The second part of a mutually reciprocal relationship is what we do for the betterment of the Other. Specifically, the services provided should be generously bestowed upon the Other for its freedom and because of its moral worth. This could include a variety of things, including organizing beach clean up days, being community advocates, river monitoring, or learning from community elders. Giving back in this way not only promotes the conservation and protection of the marine environment, but in developing a repertoire of lived experiences with the ocean, we begin to grow as a community of people. Like a family through this community engagement, there is also the potential to share phenomenological experiences with one another that strengthen and further develop erotic relationships with the ocean Other. Abram explains his own experience:

> It was a though we'd been living for a year in a dense grove of old trees, a cluster of firs, each with its own rhythm and character, from whom our bodies had drawn not just shelter but perhaps even a kind of guidance as we grew into a family. (2011, p. 182)

Within a community, we feel comfort, acceptance, and responsibility. These communities can be both personal and professional and afford greater possibility for career success and encourage us to cheerfully strive for the care of all Others we are now in relationships with—human and nonhuman.

Moving locations for a job is never easy physically, mentally, or emotionally. It strains families, interrupts routine, and adds a layer of confusion when places are strange and unfamiliar. Add to this the stresses of "learning on the job," and our lives can feel as though they have been turned upside down. Awakening our senses to the synesthesia of our natural environments and embracing phenomenological experiences for what they offer can allow us to become more adaptable in new places or situations, regardless of our time

Fig. 5 Engaging and recentering, Gulf of Mexico (Luther ©2014)

in the field, rank, tenure-status, and so forth. Developing erotic relationships with natural environments provides a necessary release from the challenges infused in the workplace, but also offers a place to go for solace or elation and a place to mindfully meditate on what we are not able to experience. We can use our connection to natural environments and our responsibility to this Other to become active members of our community. These connections are vital for life in a new place and work to raise a renewed phenomenology of place, thereby granting new Others (e.g., relocation to other ecosystems) to enter into our repertoire of erotic relationships for joyful mutual reciprocity. With confidence and feelings of greater success and responsibility and armed with phenomenological experiences, we are better equipped to take on the challenges of higher education, advocate for youth and encourage them to accept the responsibility of well-informed and active citizens (Mueller and Luther 2013). Moreover, we can use our erotic relationships with natural environments as an intuitive model that informs the kinds of relationships we want to build within our colleges and with our students. The hope is that as new faculty slowly develop and foster these relationships, the difficult or stressful days become fewer and farther between, and working for our project becomes more joyful and sustaining, and I would add that this is what most of us hoped for when entering the profession.

References

Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books.
Abram, D. (2011). *Becoming animal: An earthly cosmology*. New York: Vintage Books.
Chiesa, A. & Serretti, A. (2009). Mindfulness-based stress reduction for stress management in healthy people: A review and meta-analysis. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, *15*(5), 593–600. doi:10.1089//acm.2008.0495.
Chopin, K. (1993). *The awakening*. New York: Dover.
Clements, R. (2004). An investigation of the status of outdoor play. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 5*(1), 68–80. doi:10.2304/ciec.2004.5.1.10.
de Beauvoir, S. (1944). *Pyrrhus et Cinéus*. Paris: Gallimard.

de Beauvoir, S. (1948). *The ethics of ambiguity*. (Bernard Frenchtman, trans.). New York: Philosophical Library.
de Beauvoir, S. (1953). *Must we burn de Sade?* (A. Michelson, trans.). London: Peter Neville.
de Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The second sex*. (Constance Borde & Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, trans.). New York: First Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949).
Faber Taylor, A., & Kuo, F. E. (2006). Is contact with nature important for healthy child development? State of the evidence. In C. Spenver & M. Blades (Eds.), *Children and their environments* (pp. 124–140). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Faber Taylor, A., Kuo, F. E., & Sullivan, W. C. (2002). Views of nature and self-discipline: Evidence from inner city children. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 22*(1–2), 49–63. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511521232.009.
Glendon, K. (2005). Chad compton: The comeback kid. *Carbon, 2*(1), 70–75.
Han, K. T. (2010). An exploration of relationships among the responses to natural scenes scenic beauty, preference, and restoration. *Environment and Behavior*, *42*(2), 243–270. doi:10.1177/0013916509333875.
Jam, P. (2009). Amongst the waves. On *Backspacer* [CD]. US: Monkeywrench.
Kaplan, R., & Kaplan, S. (1989). *The experience of nature: A psychological perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Luther, R. (2013). Fostering eroticism in science education to promote erotic generosities for the ocean-Other. *Education Studies, 49*(5), 409–429. doi:10.1080/00131946.2013.825263.
Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception.* (C. Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
Mueller, M. P., & Luther, R. A. (2013). Introducing generation R. In M. Mueller, D. Tippins, & A. Stewart (Eds.), *Assessing schools for generation R (responsibility) a guide to legislation and school policy in science education*. New York: Springer.
Taylor, B. (2007). Surfing into spirituality and a new, aquatic nature religion. *Jounral of the American Academy of Religion, 75*(6), 923–951. doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfm067.
Ulrich, R. S. (1983). Aesthetic and affective response to natural environment. In I. Altman & J. F. Wohlwill (Eds.), *Behavior and natural environments* (pp. 85–125). New York: Plenum.
Victorin-Vangerud, N. M. (2007). The sacred edge: Seascape as spiritual resource for an Australian eco-eschatology. *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, *6*(1), 167–185.
Wheeler, B. W, White, M., Stahl-Timmins, W., & Depledge, M. H. (2012). Does living by the coast improve health and wellbeing? *Health & Place*, *18*(5), 1198–1201. doi:10.1016/j.healthplace.2012.06.0.

Rachel A. Luther is an assistant professor of secondary education at the University of Southern Mississippi with expertise in environmental philosophy and science education. Her research focuses on the significance of phenomenological experiences and increasing marine science education through ideological analysis, curriculum studies, and school policy.