NATURE THROUGH THE LENS
THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY WITH NATURE

By

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We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

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Abstract

This thesis explores the question, “What is the phenomenological experience of photography with nature?” Upon observing patrons at a regional park who appeared to be experiencing nature through their cameras, I became curious as to the value of photography for nature connection. Over the course of six months, I practiced photography while in nature and through autoethnography recorded my experiences and observations of photography with nature. Selected photographs are in the blog http://naturethroughthelens.webs.com. Through this regular practice of photography with nature, including contemplative photography techniques, I was able to strengthen my own connection with nature. Themes that emerged through qualitative analysis of my photographs and observations included interconnection, dualism, and the sense of “self” in photography. This regular practice of photography with nature can be adapted to engage educators, photographers, or even students in creating their own regular photographic art practice while in nature and potentially increasing their sense of connection to nature.

Key Words: phenomenology, photography, nature connection, Miksang, art based inquiry, autoethnography contemplative art
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Introduction

There is a deeper thing to express, the return of humanity to some sort of balanced awareness of the natural things—some rocks and sky. We need a little earth to stand on and feel run through our fingers. Perhaps photography can do this— I’m going to try anyhow. Ansel Adams (Burns, 2002)

Figure 1. Witty's Lagoon, 2014

My thesis journey began with a leisurely excursion to Witty’s Lagoon, a regional park by the ocean near Victoria, British Columbia. Witty’s Lagoon straddles a tidal lagoon, a large section of beach, and a selection of winding forest trails that are perfect for exploring. During our second residency at Royal Roads University, a group of classmates in my environmental education cohort and myself took a quick Sunday trip to the beach at Witty’s Lagoon as a break from a full week of busy classes. We spent the afternoon relaxing on the beach and exploring the trails. While wandering the trails of the regional park I noticed that my classmates and other park visitors seemed to be experiencing the park through the lens of the camera. Families would stop
and pose for photographs by the waterfall, while others seemed to be focused on photographing trees and plants along the trails. Everywhere we walked there seemed to be someone with a camera. Photography appeared to be a major component of the nature experience of the park patrons and my classmates. I became curious as to how each of these people were experiencing nature and the role of the camera in their experiences.

The idea of using the camera to connect with nature excited me. While at the Lagoon, deep in contemplation and observation, I realized that I had not only lost my connection to art and art making, but also to nature. Growing up, art class was always my favorite class and I would spend hours immersed in elaborate projects. Drawing and sketching would fill my time as well as the margins my notebook. I also loved exploring the fields and bushes near my Grandma’s house as a child. It was amazing what you could discover in an open field. The novelty of finding ants scrambling when you lifted a rock or the realization that cactus can grow in Saskatchewan was always exciting. This love of exploring is what guided my choice to enter into the sciences in university. My first undergraduate degree was in biology, which I chose as I had always loved nature, animals, and being outdoors. I wanted to discover the intricacies and interconnections of the natural world. However, I found that my biology degree actually lead me further away from connecting with nature and turned plants and animals into a scientific commodity. I did not like the quantitative aspect of the sciences so I moved to the College of Education once I completed my first degree in biology. I enjoyed working with children and thought that education would provide opportunities for me to share my love of exploring and creating with my students. Immediately following the completion of my education degree I was offered a teaching job and entered into the busy life of a teacher. Once I began working full time I found that all of my time became dedicated to my career and I had very little time to explore
my own hobbies and passions. The result was a stagnation and loss of an important aspect of my identity. I began neglecting my connection to both art and nature. As a result of this sense of loss, it seemed essential that my thesis topic reunite both of these forgotten passions.

I designed my thesis around developing an art practice in nature. My research was an exploration of photography as means of nature connection. Through my research I explored the question, “What is the phenomenological experience of photography with nature?” My objectives in this research were to make observations of my experience of photography with nature with particular focus placed on body sensation, perceptual shifts, feelings, attention, intuition and the experience of practicing over time. The research took the form of an exploration of my own experiences of photography with nature using a repeatable photographic method. I documented my experiences through autoethnography in a blog at www.naturethroughthelens.webs.com. As this work was based entirely around my own observations and reflections, my own personal perspective is very present throughout the research. However, the photographic method was designed to be repeatable so that others may try the experience for themselves.

I hoped that through designing and testing an easily repeatable practice of photography with nature, other educators or photographers might adapt this practice to be used for their own personal journeys into nature connection. It may also be adapted to build an art practice that can be used with students or children. Although my motivations for this project revolved around my own past experiences with art and a desire to reconnect with nature, I was further enticed to explore photography as a means of nature connection by observations of the students at the school that I teach at. Over the past few years, I have noticed that my students have become more and more fixated on electronic devices. Richard Louv (2008) writes, “For a whole generation of
kids direct experience has been replaced with indirect learning through machines” (p. 67). As my students seemed to become more deeply immersed in the world of electronics, they seemed less and less inclined to want to go outside and explore and play.

We have a natural affinity for nature as Kellert and Wilson (1993) describe in their *biophilia hypothesis*. *Biophilia* is “an innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living things” (p. 31). This affinity is an integral part of the structure of the human mind as our bodies “evolved in a biocentric world, not a machine regulated one” (p. 32). However, despite our brains being hardwired to have an affinity for nature, we often forget that we too are a part of it (Louv, 2008, p. 9). Kellen-Taylor (1998) writes, “For many who live busy lives associated with our late 21st century culture, direct experience- the shortest route to relationship, is limited in comparison to the torrents of manufactured experiences” (p. 305). I believe that photography could be a means of creating this direct experience with nature for this generation and potentially provide a bridge between the electronic world that they are so comfortable with and the natural world that they seem to be becoming alienated from. The digital camera provides something that is familiar to them, an electronic device, that can be used creatively to explore and discover in nature.

I began the thesis with a quote from Ansel Adams, a famous American nature photographer. In regards to connecting with nature, Ansel Adams states, “...Perhaps photography can do this. I’m going to try anyhow” (Burns, 2002). This quote encapsulates my intention in this research, which is to integrate photography as art and facilitating a connection with nature. Art and environmental educators, such as Jan van Boeckel (2013), elaborate upon this model of art and nature connection:
Through art, we can see and approach earth afresh. Art also has the capacity to stop us in our tracks. Art can throw us out of kilter, provoke us. It may catch us off-guard or hit us unexpectedly. This estrangement or defamiliarization is an important quality of art. It helps us to review and renew our understandings of everyday things and events which are so familiar to us that our perception of them becomes routine. (p. 67)

This research is an attempt at harnessing the power of art as a means of exploring how we see nature. It is also an opportunity to find ways to express our perceptions while in nature. Through photography as art we can come to see our environments with a fresh perspective while simultaneously reconnecting with nature.
Educator and artist, Jan van Boeckel (2013) writes that one of the greatest ecological crises today is the disconnect between humans and nature. He claims, “The lack of nature in the lives of today’s wired generation confronts us with the critical challenge to find ways to heal the broken bond with the natural world” (p. 28). Van Boeckel believes that the current disconnect with nature stems from our belief as members of technological cultures that we are separate from nature rather than a functioning part of it. We have adopted the idea that nature is something that we can view or watch, rather than take an active role in (p. 63). Contemporary technological culture has assumed a very separate or idiosyncratic view of nature and consciousness where consciousness is often seen as being a trait belonging exclusively to humans. Other beings in nature are seen as insentient objects, material resources, or even lower forms of life since they lack this consciousness (Adams, 2010, p. 16). Art based environmental educator, Meri-Helga Mantere (2004) elaborates upon this stating, “There is something fundamentally harmful in our Western perceptions of nature. The way we separate ourselves from it, seeing it as an object and thus feeling allowed to abuse it, controlling it for our own selfish needs” (p. 1).

Traditional Cartesian dualism asserts that the world and the viewer are regarded as being separate from one another (Laverty, 2003, p. 6). According to Descartes’ view of the world, the subject, or human, holds a place standing over the objects of their world. There is a distinct separation between the subject and the world, or the environment in this case. Such a distinction places the subject in a position of disengagement with their world (Ruspoli, 2011). Current inclinations towards scientific thinking have furthered this Cartesian view and furthered our distance from the environment by creating a disenchantment between the observer and observed (Adams, 2010, p. 17). According to Berman (1981), “The scientific consciousness is an alienated
consciousness: there is no ecstatic merger with nature, but rather total separation from it” (p. 17). As such our current state of relating to the natural world is one of exploitation, domination, and control (Adams, 2010, p. 18). The underlying belief is that the success of our modern world relies on controlling nature (Kellert, 2005, p. 3).

However, although we have come to view ourselves as being outside of nature, the natural environment is fundamentally related to our own physical, mental, and spiritual well being (Kellert, 2005, p. 2). Biophilia is the hypothesis that humans have an “inherent inclination to affiliate with the natural world” (Kellert, 2012, p. xii). Work done by Shultz, Shriver, Tabanco, and Khazian (2004) found that the degree to which an individual associates themselves with nature, or believe that they are a part of nature, is directly related to the type of environmental attitude that that person develops (pp. 39-40). Nisbet, Zelenski, and Murphy (2008) elaborated upon Kellert’s hypothesis of biophilia by creating an instrument which allowed a comparison of a person’s nature relatedness, or degree to which one connects to the earth and understands our interconnectedness to nature (p. 718), to environmental behaviors (p. 720). They found that those with a high nature relatedness score, or strong sense of connection to the earth, reported spending more time in the outdoors and also reported more pro-environmental behaviors (p. 733). Such research points to the idea that nurturing our relationships with the earth and coming to see our interconnections may be necessary in developing attitudes and behaviors needed to protect the earth. In her book, World as Lover, World as Self, Joanna Macy (2007) instructs individuals to nurture their relationship with the earth as a part of their selves, but also as one that we love. She writes: “We have gone on that long journey, and now, richer for it, we come home to our mutual belonging. We return to the experience that we are both the self of our world and its cherished lover” (p. 29).
In her essay, “Learning to Love the Natural World Enough to Protect it” Louise Chawla (2006) further explores the idea of developing a connection with the earth through experiencing nature, and states “secondary experiences constructed and mediated by others can never match the multisensory flow of primary experiences” (p. 70). Chawla’s work on nature connection is echoed by Rachel Kaplan (2001), who describes how our use of nature can effect how we perceive it. She states that our view of nature is broadly shaped by our expertise with nature, with expertise referring to any formal training, practical work, self-instruction, tutored observations, or frequent exposure (para. 20). Unknowingly our perception of nature shifts as we acquire new knowledge through this area of expertise. For example, someone who views nature through the eyes of an ecological activist will have different perceptions and value nature differently than someone who views nature through the eyes a forestry worker (para. 21). This complicated relationship between nature experience and personal stories has been recognized in Russell’s (1999) work as well. Russell states that our experiences often influence the development of our personal stories about the environment. Various experiences may contribute to the development, reinforcement, and even the occasional disruption of our stories. As new or recovered stories emerge we begin to reinterpret our life experiences (p. 127). Making art with nature is a powerful way to disrupt our habits and stories about nature. With our increasing distance from nature, art making can provide a tool for allowing us to see nature with fresh eyes and begin to rekindle our lost connections.

**Art and Nature Connection**

Van Boeckel (2013) believes that art has the capacity to revive forgotten or neglected connections with nature. “It (art) helps us to review and renew our understandings of everyday things and events which are so familiar to us that our perception of them becomes routine” (p.
Or as Jokela (1995) writes, “The artist does not need to overcome the environment, but rather discover it” (p. 5). Art activities provide a means for us to interpret and signify our experiences in non-cognitive ways. They have the ability to reach the sensory, perceptual, emotional, cognitive, symbolic, and creative levels of human beings. Creating art can sharpen and refine our perceptions and make us sensitive to the mystery of things around us (van Boeckel, 2013, p. 67). For these reasons, art has traditionally served as an “intermediary between humans and our environment” (Kellen-Taylor, 1998, p. 304). For over 40,000 years (Vergano, 2014, para.1) art has been a means of recounting experience, conveying perceptions, and expressing emotional, physical, and cognitive reactions. The art process provides a means for people to make meaning and search for clarity. It is a process that transforms whatever is brought to it (Kellen-Taylor, 1998, p. 304). Van Boeckel claims that when we surrender to an “art mediated experience of nature” we are engaged in a “deep and intertwining relationship between the states of receptivity.” As such we develop a heightened attention to the world through the experience of art (p. 69). The experience of art leads us to a greater connection to nature and a more attuned and attentive sense of place within the environment. This experience is accessible to everyone as we all have the potential sensing, perceiving, feeling, and thinking capacities needed to be an artist (Mantere, 2004, p. 2).

Heeson Bai believes that art, and in particular contemplative or Zen art, has the power to allow us to see and unite the “inherent duality” that exists when we view the world through the Cartesian lens (2003, p. 146). When we look at the world as being separate from ourselves, we see it “stripped of the sensuous qualities that have the power to move us emotionally” (Bai, 2009, p. 137). It is only through present and attentive awareness that we can transform the “inanimate and indifferent Cartesian matter into the body that pulses with life energy” (p. 144). Art’s power
to merge the perceiver and the perceived lies in its multi-dimensional ability to engage one’s body, mind, heart, and soul (2003, p. 142). For example, Bai states that the difference between looking and seeing lies in the quality of attention that we place in the experience. The process of seeing, as occurs when one is immersed in creating visual art, requires an intense, undivided attention directed at the object that has the effect of breaking down the division between the perceiver and the perceived (p. 149).

**Phenomenology**

The philosophical tradition of phenomenology breaks down the divisions between the perceiver and the perceived and calls into question the existence of “a single, wholly determinable objective reality” (Abram, 1997, p. 31). It is the study of our experiences in the world or the “situated meaning of a human in the world.” (p. 31) Phenomenology contends that the mind and object exist within the context of experience (Laverty, 2003, p. 5). It is not just the study of our reactions to external events, but rather our experience as a part of these events (p. 4). It is essentially the study of a given experience from a person’s own subjective perspective (Smith, 2007, p. 189). Through phenomenology we attempt to provide concrete descriptions of events and things that philosophies tend to explain abstractly (Carman, 2009, p. 634). It is the examination and justification of all of our beliefs by the test of their intuitive perception (Spiegelberg, 1960, p. 64).

Edmund Husserl, the originator of phenomenology, believed that human experience is meaningful to those who live it. Phenomenology is a means to understand, rather than try to explain, human phenomenon and correlate it with non-human phenomena (Dukes, 1984, p. 198). Spiegelberg (1960) writes, “The ultimate objective of phenomenology is the examination and justification of all our beliefs, both ordinary and scientific, by the test of intuitive perception” (p.
Meaning is central to phenomenology as meaning is what establishes what is significant content in our consciousness and allows us to distinguish between all of our experiences. It is through meaning that consciousness is able to present us with a world or an organized structure of things around us which includes ourselves (Smith, 2007, p. 190).

Merleau-Ponty built upon the philosophies of Husserl through his work on the phenomenology of perception. Merleau-Ponty believed that perception was not merely an event or a result of a state of mind; instead, perception was the bodily relation of an organism to its environment (Carman, 2009, p.630). He believed that it was the human body that perceived, and this act of perception requires sharing in the world (Gordon & Tamari, 2004, p.8). Merleau-Ponty claimed that we can perceive the world only because we intelligently and actively inhabit or “be” in it (p. 630). He believed phenomenology was “the bodily intertwining of perception and the perceived” (p.631). The body functions as the subject of the perceptual experience, with our skills and dispositions affecting this experience. It is our body set within the environment that results in perceptions. As such, Merleau-Ponty claims that “we are not just in the world, but of it” (Carman, 2009, p. 632).

Merleau-Ponty believed that we are all connected through our perceptions. In his work on perception, Merleau-Ponty states, “I perceive beings as beings with all of their complexity. I do not perceive a bundle of sense experience or what Locke called “distinct perceptions”” (Gordon & Tamari, 2004, p. 3). Each individual’s field of perception is shared with other people who are engaged in the same sections of the world at the same time. As such many individuals will encounter many of the same phenomena and therefore be subject to a shared field of perception (p. 17). Our perception is constantly grasping at specific relations based around the basic relationship of an object on a background. It is our perceiving of this object on the background
that allows us to comprehend what we are observing. Our consciousness is directed towards an object that it also transcends to grasp this object completely. As such the object is more than just its perceptible qualities (Gordon, 2004, p. 18). This capacity to be fully alive and “sensuously participate in the phenomenological world” is called participatory consciousness (Bai, 2009, p. 146). The relationships between the perceiver and the perceived then become more fluid as our participatory consciousness is activated (Bai, 2003, p. 140).

**Autoethnography with Arts Based Methods**

As the task of phenomenology is to uncover the inherent logic of human experiences and to communicate that logic without distortion (Dukes, 1984, p. 198) phenomenology seemed to be the most intimate way of articulating the experiences of photography with nature. For the purposes of this research, the phenomenological experience of photography was recorded through autoethnography. According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, autoethnography is “an approach to research that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (2011, p. 273). Autoethnography is an avenue for the researcher to explore and write about discoveries that stem from being a part of a particular cultural group or having a particular identity, in this case that of a photographer (p. 273). The tradition of autoethnography requires one to write aesthetic and evocative “thick” descriptions of the experience and use the conventions of storytelling (p. 276-277).

In addition to the narrative provided through autoethnography, the incorporation of art making into the autoethnography provides an added layer of depth. Arts based research is able to evoke or provoke understandings that traditional research cannot (Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1225). Knowles and Cole (2008) state:
...this ability of images to evoke visceral and emotional responses in ways that are memorable, coupled with their capacity to help us empathize or see another’s point of view and to provoke new ways of looking at things critically, makes them powerful tools for researchers to use during various phases of research. (p. 47)

In arts based methodology there are three main components: practice, process, and product (Sinner et al., 2006, pp. 1225-1226). As such the product, or visual material, that is produced may become the basis of further discussion, interviews, and/or analysis. However, in many cases creating the images is often a part of the research itself (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 47). Using image provides a “visual running record” of the research, but also allows for another eye or perspective on the project. This results in the research process becoming more transparent and provides opportunities for the research itself to suggest new directions, and facilitate self-critique (p. 48). Additionally, using images in the research is a way to keep all of the layers of phenomena present while communicating the research results (p. 49).

Ways of Seeing and Participating in the World

Photographer Dorothy Lange writes, “The camera is the instrument that teaches people how to see the world without the camera” (Karr & Wood, 2011, p. 23). We use seeing as a means to establish our sense of place in the surrounding world. Although we have words to explain what we see, we can never truly reconcile what we see and what we know (Berger, 1972, p. 7). Seeing comes before words. However, we only really see what we look at and to look is an act of choice (p. 8). Our knowledge of the world is gained through moving about in it, attending to it and exploring it. Learning to really see (or see in relation) comes from acquiring the skills for direct perceptual engagement with the world (Ingold, 2000, p. 55). When a hunter acquires and practices his hunting skills, his perception becomes more honed. Similarly activities where
one engages in seeing their own world, allow one to develop a more finely honed perceptual system, and their world becomes more rich and profound (p. 56). Michael Cohen writes, “This process (using and refining our senses in nature) nonverbally connects, rejuvenates, and educates us. It extends us to safely reach into the natural world in order to more fully sense and make sense of our lives and all of life” (http://www.ecopsych.com/insight53senses.html).

Our ability to see clearly relies on approaching and seeing a phenomena with a certain purity of mind (Brook, 1998, p. 52). Goethean science speaks of “first meeting” when one is captivated by an object in either a positive, negative, or curious way. It is when we are drawn to or spoken to by something (p. 54). This approach is a means of observing the world with patience and rigor in order to build a deepening sense of wonder, just as an artist might experience by engaging with their environment. We use our sensual and emotional awareness to experience a phenomenon as fully as possible while also attending to the connections between phenomena. An example of this is seen in Cameron’s (2005) essay “Place, Goethe, and Phenomenology: A Theoretic Journey” where he describes his own feelings of connection to nature. Cameron details his experiences sketching the rocks and water only to find that his continued engagement has led him to a full sense of participation in nature or what he describes as an invisible sense of giving back, or seeing and being seen (p. 188).

Several philosophers discuss participatory consciousness as a way to mend the dualism that exists between humans and their environment. In the Spell of the Sensuous, Abram (1997) writes, “My life and the world’s life are deeply intertwined” (p. 33). Similarly, Arne Naess, the founder of the field of deep ecology states in an interview with Ian Angus (1997), “Self realization, or an expanded view of the self, in which rather than viewing it’s surrounding
circumstances as a means to its own goals, the self is spread throughout the environment and inseparable from it.” Adams (2010) elaborates upon this:

Consciousness, mind, and psyche are always arising anew and coexisting freely in, through, and as the inter-relational participation of the shared earth community. Herein we discover ourselves living in and as nature’s participatory consciousness, while still dwelling as our unique individual self. (p. 29)

Abram contends that we have unlearned how to perceive. Where we once used all of our senses to experience our world, we have learned to only use one sense at a time. In true perception our senses overlap and communicate with each other (Abram, 1997, pp. 60-61). As we relearn how to fully use all of our sensory perceptions, the things that we habitually focus on begin to lose their fascination and overlooked entities begin to engage our awareness. As a result items of the human world begin to lose their distinctiveness and items from the natural world become more fascinating (Abram, 1997, p. 63). He describes the idea that we perceive and experience things only because our body is a perceivable thing (p. 68).

If the surroundings are experienced as sensate, attentive, and watchful, then I must take care that my actions are mindful and respectful, even when I am far away from other humans, lest I offend the watchful land itself. (p. 69)

**Contemplative Photography as a Way of Seeing the World**

*Miksang photography* is an example of how photography as a contemplative art can help to dissolve the dualism that exists and allows us to become more participatory in viewing our world. Miksang photography focuses on removing the mental filters, biases, and formulas that are often associated with our experiences of the world. For example, Berger (1972) describes that our learned and cultural assumptions affect what we believe to be beautiful and true in the world
Once these learned barriers are removed, we make ourselves more available to the richness and variety that exists in the natural world (DuBose, 2013b, para. 2). Miksang is Tibetan for “good eye” with “good” referring to the mind that is relaxed and open (para. 5). Good eye manifests when “a steady mind, clear vision, and soft heart come together in a single moment (para. 5)” Julie DuBose, a Miksang photographer, writes:

We do not have to travel to have this experience of newness and wonder. The richness that we have inherited as human beings is all around us, in the direct experience of the forms in our world: colour, textures, lines, light. (2013a, p. 13)

Miksang photography allows us to become completely present in the moment and synchronize the eye and mind as we take photographs (DuBose, 2013b, para. 3). It allows us to record the world as we perceive it and participate in it. Contemplative photography is a method for seeing and photographing the world in fresh ways. It is a way for us to reveal the richness and beauty that is normally hidden from view (Karr, 2011).

In the practice of contemplative photography, we must let go of our inherent desire to label and sort what we perceive (DuBose, 2013a, p. 14). Through contemplative photography we untangle our perceptions from our conceptions. The world of perception is full of details that are totally lacking in the world we conceive (Karr & Wood, 2011, pp. 35-36). We can learn to see simply, free from our thoughts that separate us from the freshness of the experience (p. 8). The wisdom of knowing arises from sensitivity to how things fit together in a relationship, not from inferences or reasoning. This sensitivity is fundamental to how we connect to the world and often lies buried beneath our insecurities and worldviews. In order to fully come to know the world we must let go of what we think we know and stop relying on the ideas and concepts that we think we know (p. 15). To really see means that we are free from forethought and afterthought (p. 17).
To contemplate means to be present with something in an open space. The camera is used to reflect our state of mind. When we see clearly, our photography fully represents our perception (Karr & Wood, 2011, p. 3). When we make observations about what is happening and then make comments about it, the thoughts and comments actually get in the way of the flow of creation (DuBose, 2013a, p. 19). In the tradition of Miksang photography, to truly express ourselves we must begin with an open, receptive, curious, attentive mind that is free from judgment and a desire to interpret. In this way we make ourselves available for impulse and inspiration to flow through (p. 11). “We must be willing to express things as they are without dressing them up in any way” (Karr & Wood, 2011, p. 6). Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson is quoted in The Practice of Contemplative Photography as saying:

Thinking should be done beforehand and afterwards, never while actually taking a photograph. Success depends on the extent of one’s general culture, on one’s set of values, one’s clarity of mind and vivacity. The thing to be feared most is the artificially contrived, the contrary to life. (2011, p. 5)

Photographer Julie Dubose (2013a) writes, “Seeing is an experience of both the mind and the body. When our mind is still we can be still in our body. We can connect to the waterness of water, the hardness of stone, the roughness of rock” (2013a, p. 44). Miksang or contemplative photography provides a means of coming to see the world as it truly is. Through this art form we can come to see the interconnections within nature while simultaneously coming to understand our own connections to nature. It is therefore a means of dissolving the Cartesian dualism that exists in so many of our interactions with the natural world.
As we engage in activities, such as photography as art making, that are both challenging and stimulating we create the conditions necessary for what Csikszentmihalyi calls flow or optimal experience. When we experience flow we are experiencing flashes of “intense living” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997b, p. 46). Flow most often occurs when people are engaged in their favorite activities resulting in a mental state of effortless action. People often describe their flow experience as being the “best in their lives” (p.47). When a state of flow is reached, a person becomes so deeply involved in their activity that nothing else seems to matter to them and time becomes distorted (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997a, p. 6). In writing about creativity Csikszentmihalyi states the following building blocks for a flow experience:

- There are clear goals every step of the way
- There is immediate feedback to one’s actions
- There is a balance between challenges and skills
- Action and awareness are merged
- Distractions are excluded from consciousness
- There is no worry of failure
- Self-consciousness disappears
- The sense of time becomes distorted
- The activity becomes autotelic, or containing it’s own meaning or purpose (p. 6).

In a state of flow our full attention is placed on the activity we are experiencing. Attention is the energy necessary to carry out the work of our consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 5). It is attention that regulates our consciousness by admitting or denying admission of information into our conscious awareness (p. 3). When we are at the peak of optimal functioning
or flow, we are in a state of concentration, or intensely focused attention on a narrow range of stimuli. Our attention becomes so acute that the rest of the world becomes “cut off, shut off, forgotten” and we are solely focused on the flow activity (p. 7).
Methodology

Integrating Phenomenology, Autoethnography, and Arts Based Methodology

My research explored the key question of “What is the phenomenological experience of photography with nature?” My nonconventional research journey into photography began as a means of rekindling my own lost connection with nature. I attempted to participate in at least one photography session each week over the course of 6 months. Coming to understand perception through photography became key in developing my research methodology. As such, the research took the form of an integrated approach to explore the phenomenology of photography with nature which was recorded through the means of autoethnography and the photography itself.

Observation with a particular focus placed on body sensation, perceptual shifts, feelings, attention, intuition and the experience of practicing over time were recorded as I explored photography with nature. The sensations, experiences, and observations that occurred throughout the research were recorded through autoethnography in an online blog at naturethroughthelens.webs.com. I created a blog to share my experiences with other teachers, photographers or anyone interested in creating their own connection with nature. Photographs from each session were selected to accompany the blog and represent chosen themes. My own photographs served to create context for the viewer as they read the blog entries by providing something tangible for them to better understand my phenomenological experiences with photography in nature. I have also included some of the photographs in the analysis section of this document as this is a “product” of my research.

Rigor and Validity in the Research

Laura Kreftig describes Guba’s model for ensuring rigor in qualitative research as requiring four major criterion, which include truth value, applicability, consistency, and
neutrality (1991, p. 215). I attempted to maintain truth value and neutrality through the honesty and transparency of my reflections in the blog. I also cross-referenced my findings with other available research on phenomenological experiences in photography and nature. I have created a repeatable practice that others may follow in order to maintain applicability. Through phenomenology, one must, “look carefully, often, and look again” (Dukes, 1984, p. 200).

Throughout the months of January through to July 2014, I spent as much time as possible taking photographs in both natural settings and urban settings. I attempted to create a weekly practice, despite unforeseeable circumstances, such as poor weather, that prevented the practice from becoming as regular as I would have liked. Trying to maintain a consistent and repeatable practice ensured that my work adheres to Guba’s consistency criteria.

**Photography Practice**

Each photography session followed the same repeatable practice to ensure the rigor and consistency of the research. I hoped that through following a repeatable practice, other teachers or photographers might be able to adopt or adapt the practices and seek their own connections to nature. In order to adhere to a regular practice, I found that by ensuring that I had time scheduled into every week for photography as well as making sure that my camera was always ready for spontaneous sessions I was able to make photography with nature more a part of my life.

- Each session was a minimum of 1 hour long.
- All photography was approached with a focus on where and what my attention was focused on throughout each photography session.
  - Each photography session was completed in silence so that attention was placed on body sensations, feelings, perceptions etc.
A new and fresh technique for focusing attention was tried every photography session to maintain a sense of playfulness.

- During each photography session observations were recorded in a journal. The observations were then written in narrative format in the blog. Representational pictures were selected from each photo session and placed in the blog. Photos were chosen to represent major themes and subjects throughout that session as well as to characterize what was drawing my attention as a photographer.

All of the photography was done without the aids of filters or polarizing lens. Also, the photographs were not altered with Photoshop or editing software after the photo sessions. This was to ensure that the perceptions remained pure and that the focus remained on the experience of photography rather than on the technical aspects of photography.

**Miksang or contemplative photography.** Towards the end of my research time I attempted to use Miksang or contemplative photography techniques. In contemplative photography one uses insight or mindfulness to guide the photographic practice. Using insight ensures that the photography is driven by pure perception, rather than by thoughts or emotions which can cloud our perception (Karr & Wood, 2011, p. 41). Contemplative photography is a three step process. It involves:

1. Connection with the flash of perception. In this stage one learns to recognize the naturally occurring glimpses of seeing. These flashes of perception occur when the flow of mental activity is interrupted and the “mind and eye stop.” During this time one becomes aware that they are fully present in their environment and that there is no doubt about what they are seeing (pp. 41-43).
2. Working with visual discernment. In this stage one stabilizes the connection with the perception through looking. During this stage one attempts to maintain the contemplative state of mind. One must “rest with the perception in a soft, inquisitive way without struggle.” One does not attempt to interpret the perception or recall past perceptions (pp. 41-43).

3. Forming the equivalent of what we have seen. During this stage one takes a photograph from within the contemplative state of mind. The aim of this stage is to produce an image that is comparable to what one has seen (pp. 41-45).

All of the Miksang exercises that I attempted are outlined in the appendix.

Analysis

The phenomenological and autoethnographic approaches to research required that the experiences of interest be revisited and recounted in as much detail as possible. Descriptions are then analyzed and interpreted to determine the underlying structures of the experience or the “essence of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Ryan and Bernard (2003) state that in analyzing texts, there are four main tasks involved including discovering themes and subthemes, winnowing themes to a manageable few, building hierarchies of themes, and linking themes into theoretical models (p. 85). I used the following methods to analyze both the content of photographs taken and my experiences as a photographer in nature as recorded in the blog. Focus was placed on drawing out recurring themes and ideas from each blog and series of photographs.

Open coding. Prior to running the analysis program HyperRESEARCH, I used open coding to find any major themes that arose in each of the blogs. I did this through reading each blog and then writing down the summary and major ideas that appeared in each entry. I then read
through the blogs a second time. As I read through each blog I looked for and highlighted the following characteristics in the texts:

- Repetition of words and phrases- topics that occur and recur (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 89)
- Metaphors or analogies related to identified themes (p. 90)
- Similarities and differences- blogs were compared to find similarities and differences in their themes (p. 91)
- Theory related material- information in the text related to identified themes and prior literature research (p. 93).

**Qualitative analysis.** After open coding, the blogs were entered into the analysis software hyperRESEARCH. This software helped me to find recurring words and commonly associated themes which helped me to illuminate ideas that seemed to underlie my experiences. Through the use of the software I was able to sort through the texts to create wordlists for each theme. I then used these wordlists to find connections and interconnections amongst the themes through analyzing frequently used words and the contexts in which they occurred. From this I was able to synthesize some general, overarching themes in the research.

**Photograph selection.** Photos were selected to represent or illustrate themes that were outlined in the analysis. The selected photographs were chosen as they evoked or represented feelings and experiences that occurred throughout the research. My method for choosing the photographs paralleled my photographic process, where my attention was drawn to particular photographs. Knowles and Cole write that in arts-based research, once images have been produced they then become the basis for further discussion and analysis. As such the
photographs I selected then became an integral part of the authoethnography, creating context for discussion and analysis in my blog.

Limitations

Weather. The extremely cold winter in Saskatchewan, followed by a very rainy spring proved to be a huge barrier in creating a regular photo practice. I discovered that my camera shutter froze when the temperature was below minus 20 degrees Celsius. Most of January, February, and March had unseasonably cold weather, with some days being as cold as minus 52 with the wind chill. There was even a photo session that was cut short because my car got stuck in the snow. During the spring the weather then became uncharacteristically rainy for Saskatchewan posing further problems for photography as the water and humidity could destroy my camera. I tried my best to make my photo practice as regular as possible despite the weather. In order to make concessions for the weather I often chose locations closer to home or cut my sessions shorter to save my camera from the elements.

Personal perspective. As this research was based on my own observations, which were highly subjective, there is a definite personal bias to my findings. It was quite possible that another individual with different interests, skills, or even mood might have different experiences. As this was a highly subjective process based entirely on my own reflections, I was very open in discussing my findings and how elements such as weather and mood affected my results. However, according to Gordon (2004, p. 17) it is this shared perception of the world that allows images to exist. In order that others may attempt to use this practice, the methodology was created to be repeatable by anyone who wishes to discover their own feelings and sensations while photographing with nature.
Technological problems. There were very few technological problems that arose throughout the photo sessions and those that did arise were minor. Issues such as the memory card not being recognized by the camera were easily fixed through simply ejecting and reinstalling the card. Similar issues with the lens not registering after being changed were also fixed by removing and reattaching the lens. Other minor issues based on my own error, such as the battery running out during a photo session or the memory card being left in the computer, were prevented in the future through proper planning and preparation.

I am the Participant

The main body of my research focused around my own experiences in photography with nature. I am an amateur photographer with limited experience in nature photography up until this year. I purchased a new camera for this research and spent much of August and September 2013 familiarizing myself with its multitude of functions. I chose this topic as a personal journey and as a way to discover new skills and ignite a passion. I found that the more I immersed myself in this “new to me” medium, the more I found myself wanting to learn and discover more about photography. I enrolled myself in an online photography course (thanks to Groupon) and found many useful photography books at the library. Unlike painting and sculpting, the art of photography was less time consuming and more portable than any other art form I have tried. These two elements made photography seem much more accessible as an art form. As an added benefit to experimenting with this medium, I found that many of my friends who are photographers were more than willing to help and give advice.

Sites

The majority of photos were taken within Saskatchewan. I took advantage of opportunities such as Trexx (a Girl Guide group that I lead) camps and school trips to help me
with selecting a variety of locations to take photographs. This year ended up being extremely busy and extremely cold which interfered with my original intentions to try to immerse myself in wilderness locations. As a result many of the photography locations were chosen due to convenience, such as Pike Lake Provincial Park, which is just a short detour on my commute home from work. Sites in Saskatchewan included

- Greg Lake (Meadow Lake Provincial Park)
- Pike Lake Provincial Park (Pike Lake)
- Emma Lake
- Trefoil Trails Girl Guide Camp (Pike Lake)
- Beaver Creek Conservation Area
- Herschel Petroglyphs (Herschel)
- Saskatoon Natural Grasslands (Saskatoon)
- Meewasin Trails (Saskatoon)
- Vanscoy Park (Vanscoy)
- Brevoort Park (Saskatoon)
- Lakeview Park (Saskatoon)
- My own yard (Saskatoon)
- My parent’s yard (Saskatoon.)

Sites outside of Saskatchewan included

- Maalea Bay (Maui, Hawaii)
- Hana (Maui, Hawaii.)
Equipment. I took approximately 2500 photographs throughout the course of my research. All of these photographs were taken using the following equipment:

- Nikon D7000 (DSLR Camera)
- AF-S Nikkor 55-300mm lens
- AF-S Nikkor 18-55mm lens
- Lexar Professional 64GB 400x Speed memory card
- MacBook Pro with iPhoto (for photo storage and sorting.)

Website. I created a blog to record my observations using online software from Webs.com. As I ran out of available free space within the first week I opted for the premium account. In particular I used the gallery and blog applications to share my photos and the corresponding experiences.

Research tools. I used EndNote as a referencing tool in writing my thesis. I analyzed the blogs using HyperRESEARCH.

Other. Throughout various photo sessions I made use of the following other equipment to gain access to sites and to aid in my photography:

- a personal vehicle
- snowshoes
- canoe
Phenomenology of Photography with Nature

I spent six months trying to engage in photography with nature as often as possible. I found that I was able to ignite a new passion for photography while simultaneously rekindling a lost connection with nature. The time spent in nature participating in focused photography activities provided an outlet for expression and creativity and also a means of coming to understand the interconnections within each unique location. The following is a summary of my phenomenological experience of photography with nature with emphasis on my research objectives of focusing on body sensations, perceptual shifts, feelings, attention, intuition, and practicing over time.

**Body sensations.** I found that body sensations did not play a very big role in my experience of photography with nature. Throughout my research I found that most of my body sensations were related to the weather or to being outdoors, and not specifically to photography. For example, in “A Storm is Coming” (McLeod, 2014q), I discuss how my senses were on alert due to the changing weather. In other cases the weather, such as the rain or the cold prevented me from fully engaging in photography. For example in “It’s Still Raining” (McLeod, 2014f), the cold, wet evening affected my desire and ability to take photographs that I was happy with. It turned out to be a dreary and uninspiring night, which was reflected by my mood. Other photography sessions, such as “By the Pond” (McLeod, 2014b), left me feeling relaxed and rejuvenated. Again, this was likely due to being outdoors, not necessarily to photography.
In *Effortless Beauty* (2013), Julie Dubose refers to contemplative photography stating, “Our mind and body function together as a unit” (p. 44). Although photography seems to be a primarily visual form of art making, many other senses were engaged throughout the photography sessions. At times, the act of photography was a full body endeavor, often requiring moving about actively in the environment while fully sensing and perceiving the space. In particular, I found that the sensations of touch, sound, and smell were especially active in attracting my attention towards photo subjects. I found that many times sounds, such as the tree branches rattling in the wind, would attract my attention and draw me towards a photo subject. For example, in the photo session, “Spring at the Creek” (McLeod, 2014p), the sound of the grass rustling drew my attention towards a garter snake in the grass. I spent many minutes observing the movements of the grass and listening to the direction of the sounds to try and capture this elusive snake on camera. I found that I had become so absorbed in listening to the snake and quietly following it, that it consumed my focus. The snake too was aware of my
presence and would stop moving any time I moved, which made it impossible to find until it moved again. In following the sound of the snake I felt as if my mind and body were united in trying to locate the source of the sound. For example, a sound in the grass would alert my eyes to try and follow where the sound was coming from. It was as if I had entered into a state of flow and all other aspects of the world, such as the other people visiting the conservation area, had disappeared. I was completely absorbed in photographing the snake. This seems to echo what Harding (2010) writes in *Animate Earth*, “I learnt as much from my own sensing organism to Rushbeds Wood and to the Munjac than I did from the data collection and analysis that I was engaged in to earn my doctorate” (p. 347).

![Snake grass from “Spring at the Creek” (McLeod, 2014p)](image)

*Figure 3. Snake grass from “Spring at the Creek” (McLeod, 2014p)*

Visual texture seemed to be another major attractor of my attention. I found that often my sight would be drawn to particular textures such as rough bark, delicate lichen, or spongy moss. Although it was the sight of these textures that drew my camera, I often took the time to fully engage with the photo subject through touching and sometimes smelling it. Other times, when
unable to actually touch or smell the object I would find myself imagining the feel of it. For example, when observing the crocuses at Beaver Creek in “Spring at the Creek” (McLeod, 2014p), I was able to imagine the soft down that covered the stem of the crocus without having to touch the delicate flower.

Figure 4. Crocus from “Spring at the Creek” (McLeod, 2014p)

Perceptual shifts. Karr and Wood (2011) write, “In taking the picture you are forming the equivalent of your own perception” (p. 45). I found that simply by looking at something from a different angle or perspective I could come to see and know it freshly. The most prevalent perceptual shift throughout my time spent with photography in nature was a movement towards looking closely and zooming in on details. The camera drew me in to focus on the essence of many elements in each location. The zooming capacity of the camera also allowed me to look and perceive tiny details, such as the new buds on the trees as seen in the blog “Spring at the Creek” (McLeod, 2014p) which would have been difficult to see without this technology.
Figure 5. Buds on the trees from "Spring at the Creek" (McLeod, 2014p)

Being drawn into close observation with a subject also allowed me to examine it from many different angles. For example, in the blog “Miksang 2” (McLeod, 2014j) I was able to explore a tree in my own yard from many vantage points and come to see a subject that I look at every day from a new perspective. I came to understand the subtle nuances that shape this tree. Leaves on the tree sparkled with sunlight or showed their veins as if being x-rayed. Tiny leaves, buds, and dead leaves revealed the cycle of life in the tree.
Another noticeable perceptual shift came from looking beyond perceived barriers. For example in the blog post “Maui” (McLeod, 2014g) I took the opportunity to look past barriers such as the highway guard rail or the fences meant to keep people off the pier. Through looking past or ignoring these barriers I was able to see the location differently than from the vantage points being suggested or enforced by these barriers. For instance, in exploring the pier in Hana, Hawaii I took the opportunity to climb onto the rocks supporting the pier and see the turquoise water splashing the cool grey posts. From above, this pier appeared grey and run-down. From below, the bridge seemed majestic and timeless.
Attention and intuition. I discussed many of the factors that drew my attention and caused me to reach for my camera in the above section. However, I feel that there were motivating factors underlying or involved in drawing my attention towards certain subjects. My own personal preferences and the conventional ideas of what is beautiful often drew me to my camera. Photographing water, animals, trees, and flowers reflects both my own personal affinity for these subjects as well as what is traditionally considered beautiful. In The Biophilia Hypothesis (1993), Kellert and Wilson discuss how our evolution has guided us towards these visual preferences. Water, green vegetation, and flowers all directly signaled a means of meeting our survival needs (p. 90). Kaplan (1995) also discusses how such elements are the components of a “restorative environment” or environments that can help restore our directed attention from mental fatigue. The major components of restorative environments include being away from the source of the mental fatigue, containing components that fascinate, an extent or depth to the
environment, and compatibility with desired use (p. 174). Natural environments provide all of these components with a rich variety of possibilities to fascinate and explore (p. 174). However, despite being in many rich and restorative environments, there were also many times when I caught myself mindlessly photographing simply because I felt that the subject would make a good picture for someone to hang on the wall. This was especially true with photographs of flowers.

I have always loved animals so it wasn’t surprising that animals consistently drew my attention as a photography subject. Whenever I sensed movement I would intuitively grab my camera in hopes that I could capture that perfect shot of an animal. I would move quietly or be still in an attempt to get closer to the animal. Often times I felt as if I was hunting the animal, following it in my view finder, waiting for the exact right moment to take the picture or alternatively putting the camera on rapid fire hoping that one of the shots turned out to capture the animal perfectly. This was especially true in trying to capture the perfect picture of a mama humpback whale and her baby in “Capturing Whales” (McLeod, 2014c). I spent many hours over the course of a week trying to catch the whales in a spy hop or roll. However, of the hundreds of photographs that I took, most of them were only splashes. I was left disappointed as I wasn't able to capture the perfect photograph that I had expected after so many hours of careful waiting. My connection with these animals seemed to be dependent on my expected outcome of a perfect photograph. Not achieving my goal of a perfect photograph disconnected me from these animals and left me frustrated with both my camera and also the whales.
There were also times when I felt as if I had an underlying expectation that if I waited patiently or sat quietly that the animals would come to me as if they were there for my entertainment. I would get frustrated when they did not turn the direction I wanted them to or when they moved away as I tried to get closer to take a better photograph, just as the pigeon on the bridge did in “Tourist in my Own City” (McLeod, 2014u). However, this serves to illustrate Abram’s (1997) notion of the “sensate, attentive, and watchful surroundings” (p. 69). We are observed, just as we observe. At times I would have the sensation of being watched by some unknown observer. It was a feeling that I was not alone in the space. There were other times, such as in “In the Hills” (McLeod, 2014e), where a pair of deer stood watching me as I watched them. In this case I was actually able to catch my observers, the deer, observing me as I sat atop a hill in Herschel. I felt a definite awareness that my presence was being taken in by other beings.
Practicing over time. One of the initial barriers to engagement was a sense of self-consciousness or insecurity in my photographic abilities. This self-consciousness seemed to arise whenever other people were near during the photography session. However, I began to realize that every photography session has some amazing photographs and others that are less desirable. You never know how a photograph will turn out until you try. I also found that by attempting to use Miksang philosophy in taking photographs and trying to capture my perception, rather than focusing on what makes a beautiful picture, I was able to focus more on the connection, rather than on the end result of the photography. Using Miksang techniques also helped me to clear my mind and simply be in my surroundings. When I was able to focus on my surroundings I was able to see more and capture the essence of the subjects in that environment. The meditative-like techniques allowed me to focus on the present and truly observe each location. Photography provided a means of being in the moment and perceiving the environment.
The increased time spent focused on my perceptions also allowed me to come to see the nuances and essence of things in the environment. For example, in the photo session “Miksang 2” (McLeod, 2014j), I was able to observe a tree in my yard for an extended period of time. This extended contact with a tree that I see everyday allowed me to see it fresh and come to understand the subtleties that make it unique. As such I developed a deeper connection with this tree. I feel that had I attempted this exercise earlier in my research I would not have had the focus or attention to details as I did during this session.

![Figure 10. Faces in the tree from "Miksang 2" (McLeod, 2014j)](image)

**Analysis of my Experiences**

**Results of open coding.** In rereading the blogs I became aware that each entry had it’s own tone and themes, which were dependent upon my mood or feelings of the day, how successful I deemed each photo session to be, and the content of the photographs. Table 1 is a summary of the themes from each blog post. These themes provided the basis for the concepts that arose through open coding.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Photo Session</strong> (Blog Title)</th>
<th><strong>Major Blog Themes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Tourist in My Own City (Meewasin Trails-Saskatoon, SK) | • Insecurity/Fear of taking bad photos  
• Stopping to look/Taking time to look  
• Human and natural world interface (McLeod, 2014u) |
| Winter is Ruining my Photo Sessions (Trefoil Trails Girl Guide Camp- Pike Lake, SK) | • Weather and elements as a barrier to engagement (McLeod, 2014w) |
| Too Cold for my Camera | • Weather as a barrier to engagement (McLeod, 2014t) |
| Capturing whales (Malaea, Hawaii) | • Capturing a perfect shot  
• Photography is like hunting  
• Extended engagement with an animal (McLeod, 2014c) |
| Maui (Hana, Hawaii) | • Colours and contrasts as attention drawers  
• Stepping beyond the boundaries  
• Tranquility/relaxation  
• Too many people as a barrier to engagement (McLeod, 2014g) |
| Taking a Break (Parents yard-Saskatoon, SK) | • Relaxation/rejuvenation  
• Finding a new perspective on something familiar (McLeod, 2014r) |
| Beaver Creek (Beaver Creek Conservation Area, Grasswood, SK) | • Peace and calm  
• Intense awareness of surroundings- animal sounds (McLeod, 2014a) |
| Solitude at the Lake (Pike Lake Provincial Park, SK) | • Stillness/being alone  
• Animal interactions  
• Expecting nature to perform (McLeod, 2014o) |
| Simply Seeing in my yard (My backyard, Saskatoon, SK) | • Seeing things fresh, from a new perspective  
• Questioning what makes beauty  
• Barrier to engagement was seemingly boring landscape  
• Distractions of everyday life (what needed to be done in the yard) (McLeod, 2014n) |
| Textures in the Woods (Emma Lake, SK) | • Moving slowly- more time spent seeing  
• Catching intricate details in the trees  
• Examining things for every angle  
• Noticing things that would not have been noticed |
| **An Evening Walk**  
(Brevoort Park, Saskatoon, SK) | - Light in the trees- changing the look of the trees  
- Reflections in the puddles  
- Contrasts between manicured exactness and imperfect nature (McLeod, 2014d) |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **In the Hills**  
(Herschel, SK) | - Contrasts in colours- lichen, grasses, trees  
- Unexpected complexity  
- Reciprocal observing between myself and the deer  
- Feeling of history (McLeod, 2014e) |
| **Reflections**  
(Brevoort Park, Saskatoon, SK) | - Images jumped out of the reflections- seemed to grow as they were approached  
- Perception shifted from sky to ground  
- Taking time to stop and look at the trees and puddles (McLeod, 2014m) |
| **It’s Still Raining**  
(Saskatoon, Natural Grasslands, Saskatoon, SK) | - Weather (rain) as a barrier to engagement  
- Landscape not living up to my expectations  
- Ominous and dark feeling  
- Low light did not illuminate life, instead made it scary (McLeod, 2014f) |
| **By the Pond**  
(Lakeview Park, Saskatoon, SK) | - Light sparkled on the water and made everything magic  
- Relaxation, sense of being refreshed and at ease  
- Ducks and geese- caused me to stop and be still  
- Reflections- interplay of sky and water (McLeod, 2014b) |
| **Miksang**  
(My Yard, Saskatoon, SK) | - Focus as a barrier to engagement (trouble stilling mind)  
- Manmade objects in the yard catching attention  
- Drab yellow and brown landscape  
- Flashes of green caught my attention (McLeod, 2014i) |
| **Spring at the Creek**  
(Beaver Creek Conservation Area, Grasswood, SK) | - Animals, patterns, changing clouds caught my attention  
- Tiny details such as texture  
- Listening- taking time to listen and see (McLeod, 2014p) |
| **A Storm is Coming**  
(Vanscoy, SK) | - Shifting colours and patterns  
- Wind and rain heightened awareness  
- Repetitiveness of landscape seemed uninspiring  
- Taking time to look closely and move beyond the repetitiveness (McLeod, 2014q) |
| **Miksang 2**  
(My yard, Saskatoon, SK) | - Noticing subtle changes such as shifting light  
- Details such as tiny leaves, textures  
- Connection through extended interaction with the tree (McLeod, 2014j) |
| **Trespassing**  
(Trefoil Trails Girl) | - Tiny delicate flowers  
- Flashes of colour (McLeod, 2014v) |
There were three major themes that arose after the first round of open coding and more that arose throughout the course of my analysis. After the initial coding of my blog posts on the website “Nature Through the Lens”, the following themes or major concepts arose: phenomena that attracted my attention, barriers to engagement with photography, and the feelings that arose as I photographed in nature (Table 2). These themes recurred in various forms throughout each blog post and informed many of my conclusions about nature connection. As this was a highly subjective approach to researching photography and nature connection, a different researcher may have entirely different results depending on many factors including level of comfort with photography, personal preferences towards nature connection, photography conditions, as well as a multitude of other factors.

Table 2.

Major concepts revealed through first round of open coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Concepts</th>
<th>Related Concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attention Attractors</td>
<td>• Details (leaves, flowers, tiny things)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Changing light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Textures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Colours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Trees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Meadow Lake (Gregg Lake, Meadow Lake Provincial Park, SK) | • Light illuminating the lake and forest               |
|                                                        | • Reflections- endless water/sky relationship          |
|                                                        | • Zooming in on little details (McLeod, 2014h)        |
| Miksang 3                                               | • Rich Colours                                        |
|                                                        | • The more I photographed, the more I noticed         |
|                                                        | • Finding the details in something we see everyday     |
|                                                        | (McLeod, 2014k)                                       |
Attention attractors. As part of the goal of my research was to place particular focus on attention and intuition, a major component of my reflections revolved around what captured my attention and enticed me to take photographs. Cohen’s (http://www.ecopsych.com/insight53senses.html) theory of natural attraction describes how all of nature is attracted to each other through a continuum of the attractive forces that created the initial big bang which in turn created the universe. He claims that natural attraction is a growing and fundamentally unifying essence in our universe. It is through this ancient attraction that our mind, body, and spirit are sustained. Cohen believes that there are 54 inherent natural attraction senses which draw us towards nature. Among these senses are a sense of light and sight, an awareness of ones visibility, a sense of colour, a sense of weather change, and a sense of form.
and design. In my explorations in photography I became aware of many of these senses being
activated or piqued.

I found that light and in particular a change in the light patterns (such as illuminating an
object or creating shadows) was a major factor in drawing my attention. Many examples of this
are seen throughout the blog posts such as the light sparkling on the water in “By the Pond”
(McLeod, 2014b), the shadows cast upon the house in “Taking a break” (McLeod, 2014r), or the
light shining through the leaves in “Miksang 2” (McLeod, 2014j). Similarly water, and in
particular reflections in the water, drew my attention regularly. The reflections in the water drew
my attention because they seemed to be magical, as if they were an extension of the land and
sky. An example of this is seen in “Meadow Lake” (McLeod, 2014h) where I comment upon
how the reflection creates “a seemingly endless water and sky relationship.”

Figure 11. Reflections from "Reflections” (McLeod, 2014m)

Color as well as texture also played a major part in attracting my attention. Both color
and texture seemed to be major factors in drawing me towards photographing subjects such as
flowers, lichen, and foliage. Lichen in particular seemed to occur in almost every photo session due to its amazing colors and textures. The varying texture of trees, and in particular tree bark, became a major photographic attractor. I found that often a disruption or irregularity in patterns, such as broken trees, often attracted my attention as well. Animals in particular created small disturbances that enticed me to photograph them.

In all of the above attractors, photography drew me to each of these subjects and caused me to look closely at the details. The act of looking closely brought me into a state of extended contact with each attractor. In turn this allowed me to observe these parts of nature more closely and come to understand them more intimately. For example, in “Spring at the Creek” (McLeod, 2014p) I perceived and photographed the tiny hairs covering the bodies of the new crocuses. Similarly in “Pike Lake Hike” (McLeod, 2014l) I was able to closely observe the stained glass patterns on the wings of a dragonfly. Just as Cohen describes the many senses of natural attraction that draw us toward nature, I found that many of these same elements such as colour,
light, and detail drew my attention and attracted me towards my photography subjects. As I immersed myself in photographing these elements, my attraction deepened as I came to see the intricacies of my photography subjects.

Barriers to photography. There were several occasions where either the elements or personal factors stood in the way of engaging in photography. Camera issues proved to be a frustrating physical barrier to photography. The camera battery dying or a missing memory card would quickly end a photography session. Another major barrier involved the weather. Extremely cold weather prevented extended photo sessions for much of the winter. Rain also acted as a barrier to engagement in photography. The weather provided both a physical barrier, as the extreme cold or rain could potentially destroy my camera, and a mental or emotional barrier as I just didn’t want to go outside when the weather was not favorable.

Another personal factor that created barriers in engagement was a certain amount of insecurity in my photographic skills. Not wanting to take a bad photograph, I found that often I
was hesitant to take pictures. I most often felt this self-consciousness when there were other people around as I was afraid of looking like a “fake” photographer or like I wasn’t sure what I was doing. However, I found that often this insecurity dissipated once I began immersing myself in the photography.

At times I would encounter a location or landscape that seemed unappealing at first, such as seemingly barren schoolyard. The boring landscape often defeated my enthusiasm for photographing at that location. However, I found that by looking for the tiny details in that landscape I could find something interesting. Large crowds or other people at the photo location also created barriers at times. I found that often other people would be a barrier to finding focus due to their distracting presence and noise. Other times they would simply get in the way of taking a good shot, such as along a trail. This was especially true in the photo session entitled “Maui” (McLeod, 2014g). Here groups of tourists were constantly moving in and out of the sightline of the camera and interrupting my focus. People making noise, such as the mother admonishing her kids over and over again to, “Be careful,” as in the photo session “Maui” (McLeod, 2014g), would draw my focus away from photography and focus more on the people I seemed unable to escape. Finding focus, especially as required for Miksang photography, was at times difficult and a barrier to full engagement. There were many times when I could not quiet my mind properly in order to give the photo session the full attention it deserved. Work concerns, or even just a song stuck in my head, could cause my attention to drift and I would be unable to give photography my full focus.
Personal feelings. Stillness, peace, restoration, and rejuvenation were among many of the positive feelings that occurred throughout many of the photo sessions. These feelings were most likely as the result of being engaged with nature or of spending time in nature and being able to relax. Most often these feelings would occur when I was able to focus my full attention on photography. As I grew in my photography practice I began feeling a greater sense of awareness of my surroundings. Looking at the intricate details of the plants, trees, and other aspects of the landscape combined with the time spent in extended observation in each location brought me to a greater understanding of each space and the interconnections within it. In conjunction with a greater sense of awareness of my space came a sense that I was being perceived as I was perceiving. For example, in the blog “In the Hills” (McLeod, 2014e), I mention my extended contact with a pair of deer and the knowledge that they are observing me just as I am observing them. The combination of many of these feelings in turn lead me to a
feeling of connection to many of these areas and a greater understanding of the interconnection of all aspects of the location, including myself.

Figure 15. Deer observing me from "In the Hills" (McLeod, 2014e)

Qualitative Analysis

After my first round of open coding I then reread the blog posts and coded them again. I found that the three themes that had initially emerged—attention attractors, feelings, and barriers to photography—seemed very much grounded in my sense of self and my own experience in photography. During a second read through, another group of themes emerged which seemed much more grounded in connection and the relationship of myself or my own identity to nature-connection. These new themes included my own connection and interconnection with nature, time spent in observation, expectations, and a contrasting of hope and despair. These themes, which broadly incorporate the themes discovered in open coding, will be discussed further in this section and integrated with the results of the qualitative analysis.
Following the open coding, the blog posts were entered into HyperRESEARCH for further analysis of correlations between codes. Many connections and interconnections were found through the use of this software. Below is a table of the themes, recurring words, connections between words and themes, and an interpretation of the results. This is followed by a web revealing the interconnectedness of the blog elements. The final piece of the analysis will be a discussion of the results.

*Table 3. Qualitative analysis of themes using HyperRESEARCH*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Recurring words in blogs</th>
<th>Connections between words and themes</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Attention | - Flowers  
- Colour  
- Texture  
- Details  
- Water  
- Leaves/trees  
- Animals  
- Changes  
- Lichen  
- Variations/Changes in the landscape | Striking characteristics that draw attention-based on senses and observation | These were all elements based in my own identity/self |
| Barriers | - Weather  
- Camera problems  
- Landscape seemed unappealing | Personal and physical problems standing in the way of photography | |
| Feelings | - Relaxation  
- Rejuvenation  
- Sadness (garbage/damage)  
- Insecurity  
- Perfectionism/expectations  
- Wonder/Curiosity | The results of photo sessions- an element of connection  
Elements of hope for future and despair over damage | |
| Connection | - Animals  
- View details through | Factors necessary to create connection | These were all elements which |
One of the main themes revealed through qualitative analysis is the vast interconnectedness of everything. Two major separate yet connected categories emerged, that of self and that of nature connection. However, it was evident through the overlap of themes that

Figure 16. Mind Map of connections and interconnections revealed through HyperRESEARCH coding
these elements are intertwined. The sense of self came into play as the research was based in my interpretation of my own photography. As such my personal thoughts, feelings, preferences, perspectives, skills, and weather tolerance were an integral part of the experience.

The act of art creation through photography with nature is what seemed to bridge the gap and create a connection with nature. Photography is what shifted my perspective and helped me to see things differently. Photography in nature created opportunities for me to spend time outdoors in extended observation and enticed me to see the details in the landscape and come to know the elements that made up each environment. Increased time in observation with these elements also seemed to pique my curiosity and sense of wonder. Meanwhile I was also coming to see my own place within the system and understand how I too played a role in it. This in turn led to my shifting feelings of hope for the future of nature and fear or despair for her destruction.

Since the creation of art is a very personal endeavor, it is only logical that my own identity and sense of self came in to play. There were times when I was very aware of my own presence in the environment and how my presence influenced the plants and animals in the system. At times I was highly aware of the individual personalities of the animals that I was photographing. In photographing the tree in my yard, I even began to give it personal qualities and see faces in its bark. I felt on the verge of participatory consciousness at times, and at others not at all. However, although I may not have realized the spirit of all that I photographed, I was able to find a connection to the plants, animals, rocks and lichen that were a part of this experience.

**Bringing it All Together- A Synthesis of the Photographs**

As a final synthesis of my work I created an art installation using a selection of my photographs. This art piece was created for our final thesis poster presentation at Royal Roads
University. I chose to deviate from the traditional trifold poster as I felt that this did not allow my photographs to speak. Photographs were selected from the span of my research period to show my growth over time. Each of the photographs was chosen to represent a theme from the work or a major idea. Quotes from other photographers (written on the pink cards) were also integrated into the art piece as a means of creating some context for the research.

Figure 17. Installation piece created for poster presentation. Photo Credit Deborah Simpson, 2014
The Role of Light. “To clearly see you need to untangle perception from conception”

(Karr & Wood, 2011, p. 36).

Figure 18. Sparkling trees from "Miksang 2” (McLeod, 2014j)

This photograph is one of my ultimate favorite photographs from the research period. It perfectly captures the essence of a tree that I so often overlook. I just happened to be standing in the right place at the right time to capture this photograph as the light sparkled through the leaves, dancing like fairies in the tree. During the photo session, I spent about an hour in intense observation with this tree and felt as if I have come to really know it through photography. I was able to see the intricate details and nuances that shape it and make it unique. Towards the end of the session, the tree even began to take on human characteristics and I started to see faces in the trunk.
This is Toby, my parent’s dog. I took the opportunity to do a photo session in my parents yard while I was house sitting for them. Toby was very curious and seemed to follow me wherever I went. I felt as if he didn’t want me to be alone in his backyard. I was absorbed in photographing something else when I turned and saw him illuminated as if he had a halo. This combined with the knowing and wise demeanor that seemed to cross his face just as I looked at him made me laugh. He almost seemed angelic. I found this amusing as Toby is known to be a troublemaker. This was a moment where the light drew my attention towards the subject and illuminated him. The perfect positioning of the sun shining down and my own location as the photographer allowed me to recreate this wonderful perception.

*Figure 19. Toby from "Taking a Break" (McLeod, 2014r)*
Figure 20. Spider web from “Taking a Break” (McLeod, 2014r)

This photograph is also from my parent’s yard. It is another example of how the sun was able to take a seemingly ordinary scene and turn it into something magical. The spider web trapped between the windows would normally be viewed as an eyesore. However, the sunshine shining down upon it highlighted the fine threads that made up the web. It was a moment where I may have overlooked the entire scene had the sunshine not brought my attention to it. The image seemed almost surreal or magical.
I chose this photograph as an example of how the changing light can change our perspective of a subject. From one side of the tree the branches looked as if they were on fire. From the other side the view completely changed and the focal point became the sky of swirling pinks and greys. I love the colours in this photograph, especially when contrasted against the stark black of the trees.

**Colour and attention.** “Perception occurs in the first moment- it is a direct sensory experience. In the second moment a concept and label arise and the perception is obscured by the concept and labels” (Karr & Wood, 2011, pp. 36-37).
Vibrant colour seemed to be guaranteed to attract my attention. I grouped these two photographs together as they were both from my yard and were both part of the same photo
The colour is what initially attracted me to these photographs, but as I focused in on each of these flowers, I was amazed by the details and intricacies. They seemed so perfect that they were almost unreal.

Figure 24. Bright green from "Maui" (McLeod, 2014g)

This picture is another example of how my eye was captivated by a splash of colour in a grey harsh landscape. This photograph was on a patch of volcanic rock in Hawaii. The rock seemed endless, dark, and harsh. The splash of green brought a refreshing glow to the sharp rocks and seemed to soften them a bit. The contrast of colour against the grey seemed to make the green jump out even more and grab my attention.
This photograph was taken during one of my first attempts at Miksang photography. While stilling my mind I was attracted to the bright colours that made up the hammock. This was one of the first moments of perception where I was able to see things as they actually are, free from the frames and filters that are always guiding our photography. As Huxley writes, “The artist has seen the “is-ness” and rendered it to paint or stone” (p. 53). I was free from the barriers imposed by attempting to take only “good” photographs.
Both of these structures are examples of colour and how the stark colour contrasts attracted my camera. In each of these I changed my sight line in order to see the image.
differently. In the green bridge photo, I stood on top of the guardrail to catch the contrast of
the green moss with the pavement. For the pier photograph, I stepped around the fence to capture
the cool blue water against the shifting colour of the posts. In each of these photographs, I was
amazed by how changing my point of view completely changed how I viewed the image. I was
also amazed by how in each of these pictures nature seemed to be finding a way to persist despite
the manmade obstacles that were in her space.

**Looking closely.** “The camera is the instrument that teaches us to see the world without
the camera” (Karr & Wood, 2011, p. 24). Dorothea Lange (Photographer)

*Figure 28. White forest from "Textures in the Woods" (McLeod, 2014s)*
These three photographs were grouped together to represent how I came to see the diversity that exists when I chose to take the time to look closely. My initial reaction to the forest
above was that it seemed rather monotonous and boring. The forest stretched on forever and seemed to be all the same types of trees. However, I used the opportunity created by the deep snow slowing my footsteps to take the time to actually look. What was revealed was an amazing world of colour and texture. There was such a huge diversity of lichen, fungus, and moss that I could have spent hours in the forest just exploring.

Figure 31. Little pink flowers from "Miksang 3" (McLeod, 2014k)

This photograph is a perfect example of how the colours and details of a flower can entrance and captivate. Photographing this flower was a bit of a frustrating experience. The flowers themselves were so small that they were difficult to focus on. Add in the gusting wind that seemed to blow every time I had the flowers into focus and you have a recipe for frustration. These tiny flowers are in my front yard and are so small that they go unnoticed. It wasn’t until I took the time to slowly walk through the yard that they came in to view. These flowers are so whimsical that they seem like they belong in a storybook.
Figure 32. Cattail from "By the Pond" (McLeod, 2014b).

Figure 33. Dandelion from "Trespassing" (McLeod, 2014v)
Although none of these are favorite photographs of mine, they demonstrate how observations over time can attune us to the different stages of life within an ecosystem. They also contain an element of hope for the future. To me they reveal that no matter what we do to the earth, the earth will find a way to overcome it. The seeds hold the key to the future and new life will spring forth from beneath the dead leaves. This is especially true of the cattail, as the waters surrounding the reeds and cattails were full of garbage from the park. I was deeply saddened by all of the garbage in the pond, symbolic of the laziness and consumption of the people using the park. However, despite the garbage, the cattails found a way to persist year after year.
I selected this photograph as an example of how looking closely can reveal a whole new world of beauty. This is the railing on the deck that has been peeling all year. I’m always frustrated by the sight of it as it was only stained a couple of years ago and began peeling within a couple of months after being painted. However, looking at it carefully revealed delicate tiny curls of paint lifting against the grain of the wood. I was amazed that this source of frustration could reveal something so unique and interesting.

Connections. “We want to contact and connect to what we are seeing” (DuBose, 2013a, p. 49). Julie Dubose (Photographer)
Figure 36. Dragonfly from "Pike Lake Hike" (McLeod, 2014l)

Figure 37. Pigeon from "Tourist in my own City" (McLeod, 2014u)
The above three photographs were each chosen to represent how extended time in contact with an animal helped me to come to understand that animal better and feel a more intense connection to it. In each of these cases, I seemed to give the animals human-like characteristics. The pigeon was teasing me, the dragonfly was posing for me, and the bee was so busy working that it didn’t even notice me. In photographing these animals I was intrigued by their movements and excited that they let me get close enough to photograph them. It seemed to be almost magical. It was a time spent in close connection and observation.
I included this picture to demonstrate that not all moments of connection are positive. This photograph turned out better than expected as most of the photographs from this winter session were blurry and unfocused. The reason for this was that my fingers were so cold that I could not get the camera to focus. Instead I would get moments of partial focus and then be unable to snap the pictures due to my frozen fingers. However, this was a moment of connection, just not a warm fuzzy one like you would expect.
Figure 40. Reflections from "Meadow Lake" (McLeod, 2014h)

This final photograph is another one of my favorites for several reasons. First it seems to represent my fascination with reflections in the water. Reflections seemed to be a common photographic theme that came about in many of my photo sessions. I also like how it seems as if the sky and the water are one endless unit. For me this represents the interconnections of everything on the earth, including ourselves. Finally, I like this picture because it seems magical and endless.
Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter, I will take a closer look at how my own photography with nature acted as a means of connecting with nature through dissolving the Cartesian dualism that sometimes exists in my own interactions with the environment. I will also discuss how my sense of “self,” including personal preferences and internal frames, affected my interactions with nature. I will then build upon the ideas of nature connection through suggestions for further study into the use of photography as a means of developing a connection with nature.

The Division and Union of Self and Nature

I found an interesting contrast between Cartesian dualism and interconnection that became apparent in my blog posts. Evidence of a duality between my own identity as a photographer and my photography subjects in nature could be seen at times such as when I describe myself as hunting with the camera. During these times where I felt myself to be hunting, I inadvertently created a mindset or frame where I was separate or even superior to the subjects that I was photographing. However, this duality seemed to contrast with and highlight the times when there was a definite interconnection between myself as the photographer, and nature. During these times of interconnection I felt intimately connected to my photography subjects or as if I had come to a more complete understanding of them and their place within the environment.

Photography as hunting. Ansel Adams, a famous American nature photographer, is quoted as saying:

The terms shoot and take are not accidental. They represent an attitude of conquest and appropriation. Only when the photographer grows into perception and creative impulse does
the term “make” define a condition of empathy between the external and internal events. (Burns, 2002)

My initial photography sessions were very much rooted in the traditions of hunting. Often my reflections in the blog posts would include words such as “capture” or “catch.” Sometimes my descriptions of my practice, such as when I was trying to photograph the whales in “Maui,” (McLeod, 2014g) even sounded as if I was setting myself up to hunt, waiting with my camera, ready to “shoot”. Interestingly, this seemed to echo how photographers at the turn of the 20th century would refer to nature photography as “hunting with the camera” (Dunaway, 2005, p. 10). I found on these occasions, when I felt myself to be hunting, were also times when I felt the least connected to nature. I felt as if I was fixated on the outcome of capturing the perfect shot. Connecting with nature had been sacrificed in order to fulfill this fixation.

Most often this hunting mentality occurred when I was trying to photograph animals. This was perhaps due to their tendency to move around and not cooperate with what I wanted them to do. I wanted the wild animal to be still or “pose” for me and quite often they would do the opposite of what I expected. At times I would find it humorous and at other times it would be very frustrating. Ultimately, these reactions were a result of me being unable to control nature. Viewing photography in such a way points to how often I see nature as a commodity. This seems emblematic of the dualistic understanding that nature is there for us to capture and conquer. The perfect photograph is something that we might hang on the wall, just as a hunter might hang a deer on the wall.

Miksang photographic methods seemed to be the antidote to my early attempts at “hunting for photographs.” I found that once I learned to release my expectations and work with nature rather than against it, my photography changed as well. Photography no longer became
about capturing the perfect picture, but about perceiving and connecting. By using Miksang techniques to find stillness I was better able to focus my attention on the moment and my experience. The photographs from these moments of stillness seemed to reflect a more clear and natural perception. These photographs seemed uncluttered by my intentions or expectations for making a perfect photograph. Dewitt Jones, a photographer for National Geographic, refers to finding beauty in every situation saying, “It seemed it was always there if I was open enough to see it” (Jones, 2001). Miksang photography provided a way to temporarily suspend or identify the mental frames and find that beauty. Through Miksang activities such as searching for pure perception of colours or photographing only texture, I was able to see more of the “essence” of the subjects that I photographed.

“Self” in photography. As with any form of art or interactions with the world, our own identity plays a huge factor in how we engage with it. As I reread the blog posts there were many times when I saw how my internal lenses and filters affected my experiences. For example, lichen, water, flowers, and animals are all things that I tend to gravitate towards when I’m in nature with or without a camera. The photographs that I took seemed to reflect these preferences. Photography provided an outlet to study these subjects with intense focus and come to know them more intimately. Similarly, barriers to engaging in photography were also very much based around my own personal preferences. I seemed to be most interested in engaging in photography when the weather was warm and the photography location seemed rich and interesting. My preferences towards “interesting” landscapes or locations seemed to be rooted in my personal expectations about what a beautiful photograph entailed, such as flowers or a body of water. A rich and diverse landscape held the promise of unique and interesting photographs very much rooted in traditional concepts of beauty. A seemingly plain-looking landscape, such as a field of
grass, seemed monotonous and boring and did not hold the promise of colourful or exciting photographs.

**Interconnections.** In *Effortless Beauty*, DuBose describes the driving force in direct seeing as being inquisitiveness. She states, “Our attentive mind wants to understand the world. We want to contact and connect to what we are seeing” (2013a, p. 49). Photography provided a means of embracing this inquisitiveness and coming to better see how the frames we so often place upon what we see affect our perception. Once my expectations and frames were identified, photography actually enabled me to strengthen my connection with nature. There were also many times when I was able to photograph the relationships between different organisms, such as that of lichen and trees, which seemed to be a common theme in most of my photo sessions. Plants and animals came to develop their own unique personalities in my descriptions of them. I described many animals, such as the muskrat in “By the Pond” (McLeod, 2014b), or the chickadees in “Solitude at the Lake” (McLeod, 2014o), as teasing the camera or playing with me. I even came to see faces in the tree in my backyard as in the blog post “Miksang 2” (McLeod, 2014j).

It was interactions such as these that made me aware of my own presence in the environment. Footprints left behind in the snow or plants crushed as I ventured off the path provided evidence that my presence in the environment did not go unnoticed. I knew that my actions would affect the trees, the plants, and the animals wherever I went. I also came to see how the carelessness or mindlessness of humans could affect each environment. For example, I have photographs from both “By the Pond” (McLeod, 2014b) and “Solitude at the Lake” (McLeod, 2014o) that show the accumulation of garbage and litter and the human impact on the
environment. However, this knowledge of my own presence within the environment only came after an extended period of practice.

**Connection- for better or for worse.** From my experiences, I learned that though photography provided many opportunities to be in nature and make connections there were also many times when I did not feel inspired or excited to photograph outside. For example, much of the winter was extremely cold. When I would attempt to take photographs my fingers would freeze or the camera shutter would get stuck. These are experiences that I, and likely many other people, would consider to be unpleasant. However, even if they were unpleasant they were still moments of connection. Freezing fingers and being wet and cold were the body’s way of connecting with and experiencing the elements. It was simply a way of having a genuine relationship with the environment, for better or for worse. So often I hear (and say), “There is no such thing as bad weather, just poor clothing choices.” We can’t control the weather. However, we can make the choice to connect with it and experience it in all its conditions.

**Connecting in your own backyard.** Some of my most profound photographic experiences happened not in the wilderness but in my own backyard or the parks near my house. I found that I didn’t need to venture far or go into the secluded woods to become connected to nature. Looking closely and embracing the diversity of nature provides opportunities to form a connection and photography provided a means to do so. Adopting such an attitude makes nature connection far more accessible and manageable to busy people. This also makes it easier to make connections when conditions aren’t as favorable, such as when it is extremely cold. Nature is all around us and we just need to take the time to get outdoors.
My own experiences in photography throughout this research led me to spend more intentional time in nature and therefore build a stronger connection. I was able to come to see the subtle nuances that shape the environment while simultaneously gaining a better understanding of interconnections that exist within it. This experience led me to make some interesting observations of the world around me as well as enhance my perceptual skills. I believe that participating in similar photography experiences over an extended period of time can lead others to find their own connections with nature. Contemplative photography methods such as the one that was developed for this research, could be used in conjunction with a visual arts, outdoor education, language arts, or science curriculum in schools. They may also be used by individuals with or without a background in art who want to enhance their own connections with nature.

Because contemplative photography practices focus primarily on expressing perception and not on the technical aspects of photography, expensive or elaborate camera equipment is not required. Cameras such as those in a smart phone or tablet are sufficient, making contemplative photography easily accessible to most people.

Louv (2008) writes, “Nature inspires creativity in a child by demanding visualization and the full use of the senses” (p. 7). Contemplative methods for a photography practice are simple enough that they may be adapted for use in schools or with children. Through engagement in photography, children could benefit from increased time in nature as well as from the creative aspects of photography. A regular photography practice that is focused on perception and exploration can be integrated into the school curriculum in order to provide students with many benefits. Although not a part of my research, I experimented with photography in outdoor education with the grade five students at the school I teach at. The students worked in pairs using
an iPad as a camera. Over the course of a few weeks the students were given different tasks, such as photographing the colour wheel. The assignment led them to look closely at the trees and elements that made up the environment in the school yard and find the subtle details. The camera, or in this case the iPads, provided an opportunity for intense visualization and observation combined with the creativity required for creating beautiful experiences and photographs.

Areas of Further Study

The responses of others. This thesis focused on using photography as a means of facilitating a personal connection with nature. The outcomes of the photography were posted on a blog in order to show others how I see the world. Photography produces tangible results in the form of photographs, which can be shared and discussed. In order to ascertain how others perceive a particular environment, it might be interesting to discuss the reactions of others to a selection or collection of photographs. Asking questions such as, “What does this photograph say to you?” or “What are your feelings about this photograph?” could help to shed light on some of the differing perceptions about nature that exist. Understanding how others perceive a given situation can help to build bridges and come to better understanding of how others connect to nature.

Similarly, several photographers could be asked to use a contemplative approach to photography in the same location. After their photography sessions were finished, it would be interesting to compare and contrast the photographs and written reflections of each individual. Since we interpret our experiences through our stories (Russell, 1999, p. 126) the photographs would provide a means of sharing stories about how we interpret and connect to the same environment. As Kaplan (2001) writes, “Nature’s multiple hints are thus likely to call for
multiple responses” (para. 29). It is our own responses to and stories about the environment and nature that shape how we view it. Understanding other’s views becomes exceptionally important when trying to find critical solutions about environmental protection. Kaplan goes on to write, “The hints we need to take must be responsive to each others interpretations and to nature’s signals as well.”

**Final Thoughts**

Julie DuBose (2013a) writes, “Distraction becomes a lifestyle choice. If we carry our camera with us it can remind us to notice the world” (p. 74). Over my six months of photography with nature, I saw growth in my abilities to perceive nature. I found that through my direct experiences I grew in my abilities to perceive nature and suspend the frames that I often place upon it. My initial experiences went from “hunting with the camera” to being able to express the essence of the subjects that I photographed. Being in nature was a full body, sensate experience that allowed me to create and connect with what I was photographing. For these reasons I believe that photography can be a means for others to form a connection with nature and rekindle a lost bond. As Kellert (2012) states:

> With engagement and cultivation, aesthetic sensitivity to an ideal in nature becomes sharpened. We may be initially attracted to particularly spectacular settings or creatures. As we gain sensitivity however, ordinary objects of nature can inspire wonder and deep appreciation. (p. 6)

It was only through extended experience in nature that I was able to come to make the connections that I did. A regular photography practice provided an opportunity for me to create a habit of connecting with nature and thus form a deeper and more meaningful connection. The regular photography practice also provided an opportunity for me to explore the changes and
Photography allowed me to explore my own inner world and discover the frames and lenses that I view nature through while simultaneously discovering the beauty and mystery of the outer world. I was able to connect with what I was seeing in nature through creating with it. I hope that others may build upon my experiences and create connections and photographs of their own.

**Returning to the woods**

![Figure 41. Found photograph, 2014](image)

This photograph escaped from my synthesis poster while I was returning to my room on the Royal Roads campus. A classmate found it sitting in the woods along a campus trail, nestled in amongst the ferns, waiting to be discovered. However, it wasn’t just waiting to be discovered, it was also telling us to do our own discovery. This photograph became alive and took on a life
message to us all. There is amazing beauty and intrigue waiting to be discovered if we just take
the time to step off the path into nature. Just as this photo was returning to its roots in nature, we
must take time to do the same. We can choose to embrace the opportunities to find beauty,
mystery, or stillness in the natural world. We can choose to connect. We can choose to create.
Appendix

Miksang Exercises Used

**Colour Assignment.** Adapted from *The Practice of Contemplative Photography* (Karr & Wood, 2011, pp. 57-59). The intention of this assignment is to shoot colour.

- When you are stopped by a flash of colour just let your mind stop
- Stop physically and spend half a minute contemplating what you see
- Understand what you see: Where does the perception start and where does it end?
- Raise your camera and look at the perception through the viewfinder. Ask yourself if this is what stopped you.
- Release the shutter

**The 20 Shot Assignment.** Adapted from *The Practice of Contemplative Photography* (Karr & Wood, 2011, pp. 86-87). The intention of this assignment is to explore an item thoroughly

- Choose a subject to focus on
- Spend about 15 minutes exploring the item thoroughly, looking slowly, carefully, and completely
- Once you have explored the subject pick up the camera and begin to photograph what you have perceived

**Exploring Texture.** Adapted from The Practice of Contemplative Photography (Karr & Wood, 2011, pp. 107-109). The intention of this assignment is to explore texture.

- Establish a firm intention to look for texture
- When you photograph texture fill the viewfinder with just the texture that drew your attention
When you see something imagine you are touching it
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