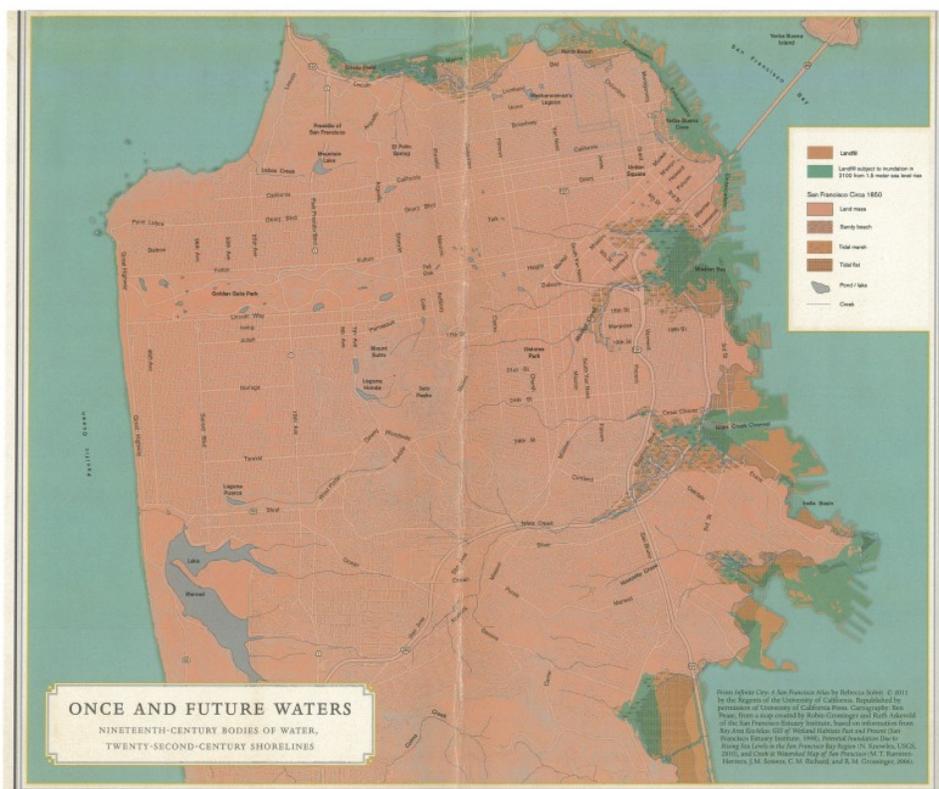


# FEEDBACK

## Two Walks: Re-enacting Two Rivers and Exploding Farms

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“Once and Future Waters” from Rebecca Solnit’s “An Infinite City.”

The art of walking is often a melancholy one. Its slowness breeds languid reveries, intense brooding, and earthbound ponderings that can tend toward a state of paralysis (think of Kirsten Dunst in *Melancholia*). However, art walks are typically anything but lethargic. Often durational and activist, they struggle against what Jared Diamond calls “landscape amnesia” and what the Greeks called *lēthē*, ‘forgetfulness,’ which gives us the word ‘lethargy’ and which gave the Greeks name of the river in Hades whose water made the dead forget their life on earth. Most of the facilitated walks that I went on this summer attempted to recall forgotten histories and past struggles that had either been paved over, repressed, or otherwise disappeared.

Two (un)related walks conveniently bookended my summer: a river walk and a campus walk. Both probed the relation between memory and landscape: one, on the summer solstice, retraced the course of San Francisco’s undergrounded Mission Creek from source to sea, while another meandered around the legendary UCSC Farm and was punctuated with somewhat extemporaneous presentations by current and former apprentices. Both walks were participatory and collaborative: Chris Sollars and The Water Shed Crew for the one and Harrell Fletcher and Public Doors and Windows for the other. Both walks were facilitated by art institutions: the former by [Southern Exposure](#) Gallery as part of their [Off Shore exhibition](#) and the latter by UCSC’s [Institute of the Arts and Sciences](#) in preparation for an upcoming exhibition. Both excursions were also posed as explicit interventions into the ecology of the museum, dealing with questions of archives, sustainability, place, and community, outside of an explicit

institutional framework. (Both also ended with a communal meal.) Though oriented toward the future and what Gayatri Spivak calls “the perhaps impossible vision of an ecologically just world,” both walks were also marked by a deep attachment to the remainders of an overlooked past.

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Chris Sollars has a thing for re-enactments and water, having recently translated John Cheever’s *The Swimmer* (more accurately, Frank Perry’s [film adaptation](#)) from the backyard swimming pools of Connecticut’s gentry to San Francisco’s public fountains and waterways. While [Sollars’ performance swim](#) from Bay to Ocean is hilariously over-the-top, it subtly links the politics of water and public space. It also serves as a transition to the participatory Water Shed Walks that Sollars led this summer (you can view the route [here](#)).

Two maps (“Third Street Phantom Coast” and “Once and Future Waters”) in Rebecca Solnit’s *Infinite City: An Atlas of San Francisco* may have provided the basis for the creek walks, but Cheever’s *The Swimmer* offers the artistic vision for a journey that traces obscure waterways. A line on the opening page reads:

He seemed to see, with a cartographer’s eye, that string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county.

The Mission Creek Walk might have been your typical part-naturalist part-situationist psychogeographic drift, had a single city block-length of rope not accompanied all of the thirty or so participants.

Faintly recalling the leading-strings and harnesses that parents and teachers sometime resort to in order to keep children in line, the length of rope that we looped around our hands for the duration of the three-mile walk added a weirdness and kinkiness to the proceedings. For us the rope symbolized the momentary resurrection of the creek. For our bemused audience it transformed our walk into a parade with a very low production value. Or just a momentary traffic impediment, albeit a mobile one that traversed numerous intersections from The Castro to Mission Bay. Someone closely monitoring real-time traffic on google maps might have seen an ephemeral red line slowly pulsing toward the bay.

Unlike the Islais Creek Walk a week before—which I did not attend but has a fine write-up [here](#)—we never caught a glimpse of Mission Creek. It is almost entirely subterranean today. No one present had a memory of ever having seen it, whether first-hand or in a photograph. If our memory relied on a particular map, it was less clear where the injunction to remember came from. Or what we were remembering. And why there was interest in this watercourse at this particular historical moment. If what we were doing there could even be construed as remembering. The topography at the outset suggested the site of a seasonal or perennial stream, as did the large inlet where we stopped at the bay. But for the most part that riparian topography has been altered so drastically that we were, in the end, following a phantom. Like ghost riding an imaginary car.

(There were, however, too many clubs, artist spaces, galleries, and non-profits along the way that had been recently evicted or otherwise pushed out of the city and which were remembered by long-term residents as we passed by the many “For Lease” signs. Later that night, Constance Hockaday’s installation “[All These Darlings and Now Us](#)” dealt directly with the memory of queer spaces in the city.)

That is to say, we were following a course projected by our fantasy, not so much of what the city was but of what it could be. What could be more utopian than the dream of a city we never had? This imaginative investment in the past and in the landscape could be seen as the anticipation of a future landscape of restored waterways and salvaged riparian ecosystems. In this way, the re-enactment of Mission Creek is part of a regional riverine imaginary that includes the campaign to dismantle the Hetch Hetchy reservoir and to halt future diversions of the dwindling San Joaquin River. And even these utopian imaginings may be stand-ins for an even greater liberation.

The walk ended with a feast of beer, bread, fish, and salad that was brewed, baked, caught, or grown along the way. We were reminded that foodsheds map onto watersheds. We also savored a delightful visual pun in the form of the ramshackle shed floating on the bay that gave the title *Water Shed* a very playful turn.

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About a year ago I met Harrell Fletcher on [on a trek from the Exploratorium to Mt. Diablo](#). We've been in touch on and off since then, and occasionally I spend a few minutes fantasizing about his experiential course flyers that find their way to my inbox.

This past week he facilitated a walk with Molly Sherman and Nolan Calish; together they make up [Public Doors and Windows](#), a collaboration in the first phase of a two-year residency at UCSC. Technically what we did—we being PDW, the IAS, members of The Garden Project, current and former apprentices, and other members of the community—could be considered a campus walk. But it was unlike any other walk in this genre. No irrationally exuberant undergrads peddled climbing walls. Speakers were not on-point. They drifted off-topic, they swallowed their words, they choked back tears. I later read that they were asked to forego any institutional voice. But given that the outcome of PDW's two-year residency is a project called *The Collective Museum*, it might be more accurate to say that they were forging a new institutional voice, one more attuned to the vulnerability and volatility of food, social, and education systems in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This walk, a component of the research phase of the museum, wound its way around the 30-acre UCSC Farm / Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems. Like Chris Sollars' Mission Creek Walk, it traced the relation between memory and landscape, but on very different terrain from San Francisco's Mission.

Part of the tone was set by a reading of Wendell Berry's "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front." The final line—*Practice resurrection*—lingered in the storage shed, literally and figuratively resonating with this space. If resurrection is taken in the sense of reviving the practice, use, or memory of something, then the farm might take this line as its motto. And if deskilling is the hallmark of the labor market and the art market alike, the revival of traditional sustainable agricultural practices represents an alternative trajectory. A good analogy might be the practice of daylighting culvertized streams.

We heard a computer engineer speak of his attempt to recuperate an agricultural heritage; another current apprentice gave an eloquent and forceful injunction to remember the Ohlone and all of the expropriations that have happened and continue to happen in their wake in the Bay Area; a former apprentice recalled in great detail living in a two-person tent for the duration of the apprenticeship. The walk was not so much psychogeographic as it was *mythogeographic*.

Many stories were intensely personal, but here the personal, to adapt the rallying cry of feminism, is agroecological: the personal was intensely mediated by the land and the relationships cultivated with and on it. In this sense the apprentices' stories were not autobiographical but topobiographical. First-person accounts bordered on the third-person; the transformations that the farm effected had clearly unsettled their perceptions of themselves and the world. (Like several project participants, I can attest to this from the time I spent at UCSD's Che Garden.) Some speakers were more attuned to transformation of community than self. One in particular, Cathrine Sneed of [The Garden Project](#), spoke powerfully of how gardening became in her hands a tool for social justice and the empowerment of the disenfranchised.

The tour ended with a striking juxtaposition in the form of a video interview played back on a laptop inside of a dilapidated slaughterhouse.

Part of the excitement of attending a walk that presents itself as the research phase of a future museum is that you are able to witness an institutional identity taking shape. At the same time, this walk exhibited so many voices and voicings that it would be difficult to develop any unified vision of the farm, the institute, or even the university. However, the basic framework of *The Collective Museum* suggests that this proliferation of voices and visions will guide the aesthetics of the museum, rather than vice versa. (Some of the basics of the project's five platforms are listed on [the blog](#) of John Weber, director of the IAS.) The "exploded exhibition" sounds particularly appropriate—and reminiscent of the layout of the farm itself: its somewhat sprawling spatial distribution already resembles the exploded view of a more densely organized agricultural space.

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# S O U T H E R N E X P O S U R E

I didn't want to linger too much on the melancholic nostalgia that pervaded both of these walks, but the pervasive attachment to lost objects—whether they be tent-sites, seasonal streams, an agricultural heritage, indigenous land-use practices—gave pause for thought. In both, something from the past, something that seemed as though it had passed by, had (re)emerged to disturb the present. Or it might have been the opposite: the present had restructured the past and brought something to light that had never been seen this way before. In any case, both walks were also concerned with futurity: the future of the museum, the future of community-supported agriculture, the future of water. Recalling Edward Said's concept of the *contrapuntal*—hearing together different lines of thought with different trajectories and temporalities—might provide a way to keep these relations to time and place in tension with one another, in a way that would make the present into more than the restoration of a past that is always other than we imagined it.