Title
Garden of Resistance: Discovering the Albany Bulb

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Discovering the Albany Bulb

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Like snagged suitcases on an over-laden airport carousel, the islands and peninsulas of the San Francisco Bay are akin to left luggage, drawn in over eons across the ocean on the subducting conveyor belt of the Pacific Plate. Alcatraz, Angel Island, Tiburon, the Marin Headlands—even landlocked Albany Hill—have discordant and foreign geological DNA. The Albany Bulb is different to the others; it is alien, in that it does not fit with the tectonic and hydrological processes that have shaped the rest of the Bay. But it is also local, in the sense that it is made of the cultural matter of the area; the collective assemblage of construction and garden detritus from across the East Bay, pickup load by pickup load.

The result is an undifferentiated micro-geology of debris that has barely begun the process of leaching, sifting and sorting that will eventually stratify it over a geological timeframe. This is a characteristic shared by most 'new' ground, but the Bulb has a finer grain than most reclaimed sites by virtue of the atypically small individual units of refuse; some garden waste from Kensington, adjacent to some road base from Berkeley, next to some demolition rubble from El Cerrito. Many of these loads carried biotic stowaways that have in turn formed a mutant ecology; part urban, part paradisiacal.

Landscape accumulation map of the Albany Bulb
(courtesy of Lauren Bergenholtz)

The morphology of the Albany Bulb is unique; geographers would term the protrusion a peninsula, for it remains connected to the 'real' land of the East Bay shore. But it doesn't look like other peninsulas; ordinarily peninsulas resolve themselves the further one journeys towards the gently tapering inevitability of the apex. Accordingly, for ecologists the "peninsula effect" refers to declining biodiversity along its length. But the further we venture into the Bulb, the more it conceals and entangles us; the more its diversity—both biotic and cultural—proliferates. Rather more like a peninsula that wants to be an island; so perhaps tombolo—the description for an island connected by a sand spit—or *halbinsel*—the German term for peninsula—are more descriptive.

How are we to navigate this strange half-island? The landscapes that we are accustomed to comprise gullies and ridges that harbor branching patterns of water; rivulets that become streams, streams that flow into creeks, creeks that merge into rivers, rivers that become brackish and eventually estuarine. If we are lost in these landscapes, survival experts advise us to follow a molecule of water downhill, eventually to be reunited with the civilizations that are inevitably sited along great waterways. But the karstic terrain of the Albany Bulb is riddled with pores within the ill-compacted strata, so that water quickly finds its way underground and forms no creeks. To follow water here is likely to lead one further astray into a hollow or even the folds of a small cave.

Instead, we follow myriad paths that entangle the amorphous and illegitimate topography of the Bulb. But this is a trap, since the paths were originally forged by people who did also not know where they were headed either. The aimless drift of the Bulb's Adam and Eve became etched into the ground as others followed like a predetermined choreography. With each subsequent footfall and each parting of the brush, the paths are legitimized as a grand design. But the authority of the path is not as absolute as we like to think; consider the prevalence of trails on the Bulb that diminish in width, where with each inch that the way narrows, more and more people have harbored doubts and decided to turn back, compounding the gathering narrowness in an endless feedback loop. A path's mandate is to deliver us somewhere, and so to turn around in retreat is to undermine the fundamental basis of its charter.

Having lost faith in the paths, and unable to sight any town halls or mountain landmarks with which to orient, we reach for our smart phones (tricorders) and triangulate off satellites and cell-phone towers. The results come in: the GPS tells us where we are but not where our place is. We decide the time has come to demystify the Bulb's vestiges and disconnections and we set about making our own maps. Like geologists in a road-cut, we rifle through the detritus where it breaks the surface to form outcroppings of tin and wire, in an attempt to decipher the composition of the substratum. We classify and map the plants that we encounter according to three categories: (a) plants with edible fruits; (b) plants that scratch our skin; and (c) plants that appear small when we see them from a distance.

We circumnavigate the half-island, conflating the cyborgian shore of cement and rebar with concrete knowledge, much as Captain Cook commandeered the world for the empire by surveying every single island coastline he laid eyes on. As we move along, we give names to features of the land as we see them. We project our moods into the landscape and name things after the way we feel at the time: the Bluff of Awkward Melancholy; the Gulch of Assertive Disappointment. Occasionally, we consult the indigene, who frustratingly often give us several names for the same topographic feature, stretching the limits of our reductive sense of exclusive Cartesian space. How can one place have two or more identities, even to the same person? Sometimes we find it easier to just choose names that remind us of home.

We walk out along the furthest reaches of the many rocky protrusions and look back to cross-reference internal landmarks which habitually disguise their identities from new angles. While out amongst the retreating tide, we identify as mariners and begin to consider J.G. Ballard's deciphering of Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty on the shores

of the Great Salt Lake. Ballard triumphantly declared the Jetty a berth for a strange ship captained by a Minotaur and carrying a clock as cargo. The Bulb is also a labyrinth but no-one would intentionally dock there, for it has no safe harbor. It would be more appropriate to be shipwrecked.

Indeed, once a man living on the Bulb tried to escape (or perhaps trade-up to a real island like Alcatraz or Angel) by constructing a ship. But his journey inevitably drew him full circle where the vessel floundered on mutant shores; the skeleton of the hull still dominates Shipwreck Cove, so named—we are told—years in advance as it lay patiently in ambush so as to fulfill its destiny. If Smithson's Minotaur delivered a clock, then the Bulb's unfortunate return-boatman staggered ashore with news of a world in flux; *the Pacific Plate is moving east at 3 inches a year, the same speed it is said at which fingernails grow.* Given precise tectonic navigation, the Hawaiian Island chain is due on our shores in a little under 50,000 years. We have work to do. Our maps are already out of date. Tectonic drift will wipe them clean, if rising tides don't sink them first.

This reminds us of the blank voids that tourists often unwittingly create on map-sign-boards along hiking trails by reaching out and touching the place where they are at, such is the need to commune map with ground, to say "I am here and not there." The resulting erasure of the map around the very area that would be useful to orienting their onward journey is a metaphor for their impact on the land. But the Bulb was not and will not be erased from the map; it never existed in the first place, a fantastic mirage which some nautical charts still claim as open water on the Berkeley shore. And anyhow, many of its tourists decided to stay, fabricating small castles for themselves in the heath.

Kevin Lynch said that maps must be good enough to get you home, so we assume these indigenous settlers lost either their maps or their homes elsewhere. He also said that cities should have blank spaces where people can extend the map for themselves. But Lynch wasn't referring to a nihilistic silence that Modernity would attribute to such a place. Rather, where many maps are written onto the ground by the actors that make noise in that particular time and that particular place. To be sure, the Albany Bulb seems inert from the panoptic gaze of a satellite, but is absolutely teeming with variation and complexity on the ground. Richard Sennett said that rough terrain is the landscape in which expression occurs. We wonder, is this why so many artists have felt compelled to create, to conjure representation from the flotsam and jetsam of the Bulb?

Finally, we locate the one civic institution on the Bulb; a library with canvas walls that measures no more than six feet by four, sited at the convergence of many paths, although it is not clear which came first, the convergence or the library. Either way, it is an appropriate setting, since as Jaques Derrida ruminated, thought is like a path. Robert Harbison said that the pathy garden is an intellectual place that invites comprehension. Barely squeezing in, we consult the books and deliberate: *but is the Albany Bulb a garden? Is it cultivated or wild? Who is the author?* Bernard St-Denis said that the root cause of this confusion is the implicit presupposition that garden be seen as intentionally designed and made—*as artifice*—for the pleasure of humans. But the Bulb is the work of many, yet the design of none. It is the assemblage of the waste of countless other gardens, and yet the new whole pays no heed to its constituent parts.

Yes the Bulb is a garden, but not the paradisiacal kind (the dominant historical garden lineage). Rather it is the other type, the type that just keeps spontaneously blooming in new locations. The Albany Bulb is a *garden of resistance*. Its future, ironically, is uncertain, for well-meaning efforts are underway to 'preserve' it. Entropy will do the rest.

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