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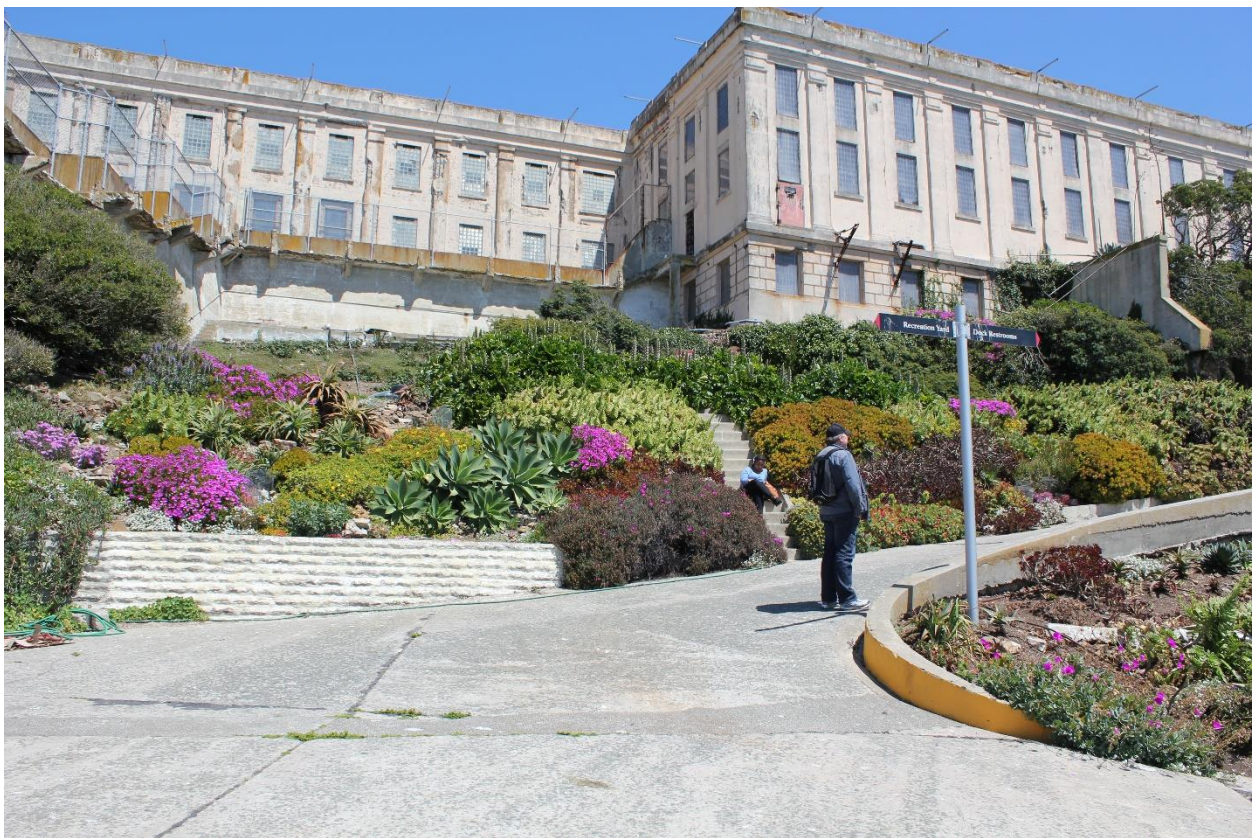
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Examiner: Prof. Dr. René van der Duim

August 2015



## Living Critique or Beautiful Punishment?

Counter-visualizations  
of the Gardens of Alcatraz:  
An exercise in re-imagining  
prisons through the exploration  
of non-human agencies



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*Para Manuel Enrique  
y Soledad Virginia Lara.*

*Gracias por sus corazones sólidos.*

*Dedicated also to the lives stolen and impacted by detention centers in all their iterations,  
including but not limited to: state, federal and political prisons, jails, juvenile detention centers,  
immigration detention centers, military detention centers, and psychiatric detention centers.*

*May the “otherwise” come sooner rather than later.*





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## Summary

Given that Alcatraz Island, located in the San Francisco Bay, remains an active part of the U.S. prison system, this paper approaches the newly rehabilitated Gardens of Alcatraz as a setting in which encounters with non-human agency, and references to these encounters, may contribute to the much wider processes of re-imagining prisons and justice. From the 1850's to the 1960's, Alcatraz Island functioned as a place of military and federal war practices and punishment. And for just as long, gardens existed on the island as part of the daily lives of Alcatraz employees, their families, and some inmates, who all lived on this 22 acre sandstone rock. After the prison closed in 1963, the gardens, along with the rest of the island, was abandoned, and they remained largely neglected even after the island was re-opened as a National Historic Landmark. However, in 2003 the Gardens of Alcatraz rehabilitation project began. Today the project is completed and includes a successful volunteer program that enables people to participate in the maintenance and promotion of these unique gardens. The project also includes garden tours and other small ways in which visitors to the island can engage with the gardens, a dynamic which creates an exceptional setting that combines elements of prison tourism and garden tourism.

By engaging with theories of non-human agency, and working within Schept's counter-visual ethnographic methodology, I use photographs, interviews with volunteers, and observations of garden tours to pick out specific instances which somehow are in conflict with the coherency of the gardens' "official" framework of interpretation. Within these instances there often lie processes of negotiation between the volunteer gardeners and the physical matter of the gardens. While these negotiations begin in the realm of the physical, they often cross into the realm of the symbolic in a way that speaks to wider processes of authority and control and imbues physical agents with an array of symbolic agencies that may offer unexpected insight. I conclude by positioning these gardens in more explicit relation to some of the broader dynamics of the prison-industrial complex, and by offering considerations of these encounters-in-the-garden as counter-visual material with which we may continue to re-imagine the place of the prison within our physical, social, and ideological worlds.





It is *because* we are thrown into history that we must cultivate our gardens. [...] History without gardens would be a wasteland. A garden severed from history would be superfluous.  
(Harrison, 2008: x)

No person or thing has been more successful at abolishing the prison than the weed and weather.  
(Brown, 2014: 67)

Living things are restless.  
(Tudge, 2005: 16)



# 1 Introduction

In the book *Gardens of Alcatraz* (1996), co-author Russell Beatty writes:

Aesthetically, Alcatraz's plantings lack a designer's approach to composition, color, texture, form, and space. But in winter and spring, as though gracing an ancient ruin, their great beauty emerges in a kaleidoscope of color. The old rambling roses, the pink ice plant, and the geraniums contribute to this stern place.

When we realize the extraordinary effort that was required to create that beauty, aesthetic appreciation becomes visceral. Suddenly we appreciate *the true meaning of gardens*: the human drama they represent. (p58; emphasis added)

This representation of the infamous island's gardens, which at the time were largely overgrown after four decades of neglect, takes a singular approach to the "true meaning" of these spaces, and shifts the focus from one centralization, that of the aesthetic value of natural beauty, to another, human drama, both of which tend towards anthropocentrism (which may seem obvious if we are to consider humans as the only creatures who attempt to prescribe meaning to a garden—this, however, should not be taken for granted). The passage insists on one or the other of two extremes, and skips over the possibility, perhaps the necessity, of a more nuanced examination of gardens, one that leaves room for multiple truths. While it is certainly fair to insist that one compelling aspect of gardens, especially the gardens of Alcatraz, is their capacity to conjure stories of human drama, placing this characteristic at some arbitrary center simplifies the varying roles that these spaces fill, and have filled from time immemorial. It is, perhaps, merely a matter of word choice. However I argue that something much more fascinating is made possible when gardens are approached in a manner which is fundamentally relational, rather than in a way that puts their existence at the service of humans and their "drama."

Gardens have existed on Alcatraz Island, most well-known for its use as a federal penitentiary in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, for well over one hundred years. They were part of the daily lives of Alcatraz employees, their families, and some inmates. After the prison closed in 1963, the gardens, along with the rest of the island, were abandoned. Ten years later, though, the island was re-opened as a cultural landmark, and while the buildings continued to be maintained for public use, the gardens were overlooked, left without human caretakers until 2003, when their rehabilitation began.

This project prompts an examination of the continuous legacy of Alcatraz Island, particularly its rehabilitated gardens, as a setting in which encounters with non-human agency, and references to these encounters, may contribute to the much wider processes of re-imagining prisons and justice. In particular, this paper focuses on encounters between, on one end, people who volunteer to rehabilitate and

maintain the gardens, and on the other end, the stuff of the gardens itself. (One exception to this is an interview conducted with one of the few paid garden staff members.) It also reflects on my own encounters as well as those of some of the visitors to the gardens. In doing so it implores a dual framework, grappling with a theoretical grounding in studies of non-human agency (Brown, 2014; DeSilvey, 2006; Ginn, 2014; Hitchings, 2006; Jones and Cloke, 2008; Mills, 2013; Ren, 2010; Tsing, 2012), in conjunction with a methodological grounding in what is referred to as counter-visual ethnography (Schept 2014). These two frameworks both raise questions of authority and control, and are meant to implicate the two worlds of tourism practices which are bridged by the experiential program of the Gardens of Alcatraz: garden tourism (Benfield, 2013) and prison tourism (Brown, 2009).

In the case of Alcatraz, this process may begin first by establishing the island not as a passive or static repository for human action and experience, as it is often presented in the dramatized depictions of the penitentiary era, but rather as a pulsing entanglement of various lives, forms, and forces that are sometimes difficult to distinguish despite the central roles they maintain. One example of such entanglement: in 2012 the historic water tower on the island was repaired for a cost of \$1.1 million. Extensive corrosion was removed, and the structure received new paint (the presence of historic graffiti was preserved) and seismic stabilization. One news article, published before the repairs began, explains that “the harsh marine environment [has] slowly eaten away at the water tower’s structural integrity” (Decker, 2011).

Simply due to their location, it is true that these gardens are recognized as unique, and have received considerable attention from numerous sources. We often make sense of the world through metaphors (see Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) and the Gardens of Alcatraz offer many, often provoking those who encounter them to think in new ways about grand concepts like life and death, freedom and restriction, and, according to one interviewee, “rebirth and rejuvenation” (Interview 4). In moving through this space of metaphor, volunteer gardeners have daily small collisions with very real elements of the non-human world. Through considerations of how these collisions are navigated and spoken of, I hope to construct a case study which may extend beyond the enclosures of the garden in a way that is not confined to metaphor.

Through my research, I felt that something was missing (including from my own preparation for my field work) in terms of what precisely is illuminated by the stories of these gardens. As powerful as their stories and most obvious metaphors may be, I felt that there was something left unexamined, namely how these small patches of land relate to the wider prison system within which they are inconspicuously nestled.

The project of the Gardens of Alcatraz is indeed a project of historical rehabilitation, re-enlivening the past so that we may appreciate it in the present, *in situ*. However, its potential, what it may signify on a larger scale, is too great to overlook. And it is especially pressing that we do look, given the wider context of the United States, a country which has more incarcerated people than any other nation (Brown, 2009: 5) and allows private, for-profit prison companies to influence the politics of the criminal justice system to their own financial benefit (Justice Policy Institute, 2011).

What do these gardens suggest about the broader state of prisons today? Not just prisons like Alcatraz (abandoned, museumified, sensationalized, glorified, etc.) but rather other prisons which have not undergone a quite so explicit failure as to have been closed down, and which are not so available to the public's gaze? What do the gardens say about how conditions in these other sites of punishment may evolve in the future?

#### Towards anthrodecentrism

In the essay "Of Prisons, Gardens, and the Way Out", criminologist Michelle Brown asks, by rephrasing a question posed by author Michael Pollan, "What if now, instead of to the prison, we were to look to the garden for the making of a new ethic" (2014: 79)? She goes on to summarize, with poetic familiarity, the relationships between gardeners and their gardens, and the tensions that lie therein. She refers to the sense of "voluntary dependence" that gardeners experience, as described by Cooper, "like the relationship to the lover, the 'best position' any of us can be in" (Cooper, 2006: 96). Here is a dynamic which may function as "sanctuary" or even "a peaceful prison" (Brown, 2014: 79). (Were Adam and Eve not confined to their Eden? Complexity arises when paradise is a place without an exit.) As prison-like as the enclosures of a garden may be, with rules of control and ordering playing inherently necessary roles in both of these biopolitically charged spaces, gardens also act as "the prison's inverse," as they offer:

a sense of engagement, agency, and sensory stimulation otherwise unavailable – a link to the vivid "natural" of the imaginary. These are spaces rife with potentiality where people consciously seek to foster a culture of equitable, idealistic engagement, through, no small irony, the control of space. (*Ibid*)

And in spaces where prisons and gardens may be functioning in conjunction with one another:

the garden powerfully reinvents the horizon of the prison, one cultural landscape contradicting the other. Whereas the prison stops the natural scenery violently and peremptorily with the wall in front of you, gardens call forth the qualities of another kind of vista, one that is visually engaging, ever-extending, inviting the mind to ponder, puzzle, and seek out the secrets of a deeper reality. (Brown, 2014: 79-80)

This type of visual experience is apparent on Alcatraz, and is compounded by the impact of the sights and sounds of San Francisco, coming from across the Bay's waters and over the prison's walls. The overall panoramic experience bewilders the senses. What if, indeed, this type of complex, relational ethic, based on concession as much as coercion, was referred to when considering the problematic state of the questionable ethics embodied in today's prisons? Would the biopolitical interventions of punishment and rehabilitation be otherwise? Would gardens be otherwise? For decades this island has been associated with punishment and desperation (perhaps to a greater degree than what is reasonably warranted). But looking on site today, what do we find at this forthcoming end of the island's history? And what do the processes of looking and finding suggest about our privileges and responsibilities as people who are free to enter and exit the role of "penal spectator" (Brown, 2009)?

#### Non-human agency

In many of the "official" interpretations of places, objects, and events associated with the Alcatraz gardens, non-human agency is largely unaccounted for and effectively written out. There are, nonetheless, countless ways that non-humans exert varying degrees of agency, are conversationally called upon, and represented as co-creators of the gardens and the relationships therein. Rather than engage extensively with any core texts on decentered agencies, my project in some ways takes for granted that explorations of this type are valuable within the field of cultural geography. It focuses instead on research that explores more specific iterations of this wide-ranging body of theory, but still, it is important to establish a basic understanding. Furthermore, these foundational theories related to non-human agency provide an array of concepts and terminology with which to consider my experiences during my field work.

Jones and Cloke (2008) usefully outline four "streams of social theories" (p82) which incorporate and encourage investigations of various agencies. They begin with eco-feminism and Donna Haraway, who says "that 'nature' is a multidimensional tangle" (p83). They follow the next stream through conceptualizations of "social nature", and to David Harvey who says that the "artificial break between 'society' and 'nature' must be eroded, rendered porous, and eventually dissolved" — an argument which, considering the qualities of my own research setting, and knowledge of what happens to metal and weak concrete too long exposed to sea air, offers some relatable imagery (Harvey, 1996: 192 in Jones and Cloke, 2008). They then follow the next stream through to the work of socio-anthropology and the notion of "dwelling" (p83) and how places are always the result of a collection of many agencies. The emphasis for Jones and Cloke's work, however, lies in the fourth theoretical stream, Actor Network Theory, which "has recognised the agency of non-humans as an essential element in how the natural and social flow into one

another” (p84). For the purposes of my own work, I find intriguing their reference to the “hybrid collectif” (Callon and Law, 1995 in Jones and Cloke, 2008), which Whatmore describes as follows:

The notion of the hybrid collectif implodes the inside/outside binary which discerns social action as an individual property of discrete, unitary individuals (including collective individuals). Agency is reconfigured as a relational effect generated by a network of heterogeneous, interacting components whose activity is constituted in the networks of which they form a part. (Whatmore, 1999: 28 in Jones and Cloke, 2008)

Although these words are meant to describe actor-networks in general, these processes of “flow[ing] into one another,” of hybridizing and collectivizing, seem to be the defining motions of the garden. They are processes that, on any given day during any given growing season, seem to be readily tangible so long as one is able to sit still long enough so that they may proceed undisturbed. In the interest of investigating relational processes such as these, rather than fixed identities, I attempt to look at things, other-than-human things, that are often overlooked as fellow members of the social world, and see what they are *doing* rather than what they are *being* (Ren 2011: 861).

Summarily, Jones and Cloke use their work to “suggest that not only is there a need to move away from treating the human realm as separate, privileged and ontologically unique in terms of agency, but there is also a need to disaggregate the notion of agency itself” (p86). Gardens are a good place to experiment with these processes, as they are inherently a space of compromise between “human culture,” which tends to dominate the natural world, and “wild nature,” which may be romanticized as superior to anything altered by humans. According to Michael Pollan, author of *Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education*, the garden “is a middle ground between nature and culture, a place that is at once of nature and unapologetically set against it” (Pollan, 1991: 60). It is a place where the “hard line” of domestication, where “you are either in the human fold” or not, becomes blurred (Tsing, 2012: 144). The prison may function as an interesting parallel here, as it is “at once” of *human* nature, and at the same time “set against it” – although it is more difficult to be satisfied with the prison as a suitable “middle ground between nature and culture”, as it fails to allow for a processes of fruitful hybridization comparable to those which occur in the garden.

Russell Hitchings (2006) offers to my project a very relevant, even crucial, approach to agency and control, as he uses the space of the domestic garden to explore such notions. He refers to plant life as “an uneasy mixture of collective landscape and independent organism” the proportions of which are never settled but are “actively negotiated”; he tells us that “understandings emerge from the specific interactions that we have” (p377). Therefore, he emphasizes, it is important “to attend to the context” and to “reconsider

the garden and the changing agencies evident there since this empirical focus can [ ] usefully take these wider debates back down to more palpable issues of everyday physical control” (p378).

I believe that what Hitchings is referring to here is the importance of witnessing the materially grounded agential dynamics within gardens, and extending what is witnessed here to other realms of daily life. And what is at stake in my own project is precisely this, the capacity to witness the agential dynamics of the Alcatraz gardens and to allow what is witnessed to impact the realms of political and lived experiences, for these are the realms through which meaning-making more vitally occurs. These are the realms in which the ills of the prison-industrial complex may be more acutely addressed. This approach evokes the symbolic value of the dynamics seen in (prison) gardens, which is something that I explore throughout this paper with consideration of my own empirical focus. The context attended to by this project is the Gardens of Alcatraz, and here, as per Hitching’s suggestion, reconsidering the negotiations surrounding agential power may cast new light on the “everyday physical control” associated with the spaces and dynamics of mass incarceration. Hitchings refers to a process of active negotiation between gardeners and the plant life of their gardens, which is something that we see also in the Alcatraz gardens. Beyond this, however, I argue that we can see that there are many additional processes of negotiation occurring. These are negotiations which begin in the realm of the physical but often seamlessly and unnoticeably cross into the realm of the symbolic. Indeed, from these exchanges among various physical agencies comes an array of symbolic agencies—embedded within all facets of this prison garden, including the work of the gardeners, the formal heritage policymaking surrounding the rehabilitation project, as well as the stark yet simple ruination of the island’s built landscape, all of which are active parts of the United States’ broader physical, social, and ideological prisonscape.

#### Counter-visual ethnography

It is my hope that reflecting on non-human agency will prove to be an effective method (or at least a push in the direction) of challenging the normalization of violence and control inherent to carceral spatialities and the wider structures which contain them (Minca and Ong, 2015). Given this aim, it is useful to further contextualize my project from a methodological perspective. Judah Schept (2014) has produced a compelling piece of work propositioning the use of a “‘counter-visual’ scholarly practice that can better perceive and intervene in the visual and ideological prevalence of the carceral state” (p202). This proposition is based on Mirzoeff’s notion that the “right to look” at prisons as they are is impeded by the state’s “authority to tell us to move on” and its “exclusive claim to be able to look” (Mirzoeff, 2011: 474 in Schept, 2014). Mirzoeff calls this power “visuality” and it entails not just the “exclusive claim to be able



to look” but also the power to render certain things (prisons and inmates, for example) visible in particular ways. Beyond simple censorship, visibility entails a complex authorial process wherein the state is “*constructing, legitimating, and normalizing* its own history and presence” (Schept, 2014: 200; emphasis in original). Counter-visibility is a challenge to this power, and some form of it “always exists in antagonistic relation to those peoples, institutions, and structures seeking to ‘authorize authority’ by aestheticizing a particular (im)moral geography” (Wall and Linneman, 2014: 140 in Schept, 2014). Schept argues “for a committed epistemology [...] that foregrounds and then destabilizes the geographical and political-economic structuring of contemporary discourse and knowledge” (p203). This may be possible through a dual process “that may necessarily be in tension” that involves both “a methodology of engaged and reflexive empathy” (p207) and also “subjecting [...] ‘common sense conclusions to interrogation, historicization, and potentially rejection” (p209).

“Prisons can control what we see when we look at their facades and when we tour,” Schept says, “they do not have to structure our gazes into their pasts, our examinations of their effect on the landscape around them, and our imagining a future without them” (p217). It is precisely this understanding that I carry with me while working through this project. Many individuals, especially those who have been exposed to the abundance of mass-media representations of prisons (which is really the only way most people get their information about what prisons are), may easily assume that they know what to look for in order to believe that are seeing an honest depiction of a prison. But given the fact that most penal spectators are basing their expectations on highly selective imagery, it is impossible for someone who has never been imprisoned to ever really know if they have *seen*, if they have witnessed, a prison.

A working definition of counter-visual ethnography is: “a methodology that illuminates visibility—again, read as the structuring and authorial authorization of history—and mobilizes the unseen for the purposes of a right to see” (p217). With this project I claim that at the same time that Alcatraz is an active component of the prison-industrial complex, structuring peoples’ understandings of imprisonment with state-sanctioned visibility, perhaps it also offers elements which are insightful for the counter-visual process. It is with this understanding that I attempt to mobilize some of “the unseen” of the Alcatraz gardens. I do this as a reminder to look, and to somehow contribute to the struggle to, at the very least, render the prison more visible, or perhaps even to affirm and act upon its obsolescence (Davis, 2003).

Within the limitations of my research and this paper, the aforementioned potential of the gardens’ symbolic agency, as well as other agencies, may be effective insofar as they can assist in the process of undermining or reimagining the “common sense” place of prisons within our psyches, our landscapes, and

our contemporary criminal justice systems. In the aforementioned essay by Brown, she refers to her work as “a project of the imagination” which inquires “how we might imagine ourselves out of the penitentiary by way of both inadvertent and intentional gardens” (2014: 68). My project functions similarly and offers, as material to spur the imagination, stories, considerations, photographs, and observations of the Gardens of Alcatraz. In an earlier, separate piece of work, Brown writes that Arjun Appadurai’s notion “of the imagination as ‘an organized field of social practices’ and complex form of work, as a negotiated mode of agency embedded with intricate and dense media structures and economic conditions, points to the manner in which the production of desires, subjectivities, terror, and coercion sit center stage to issues of representation generally but also with an important specificity to criminology” (Brown, 2009: 51). Considering these words, this project is my own “form of work,” a negotiation of my own agency, my own structural upbringing, through which I may confront the challenges and paradoxes which lie within a space that is at once enchantingly beautiful and rife with violence.

### Data Collection

This research is situated primarily in the field of cultural geography, and as such draws from a number of tangentially related disciplines. It requires consideration of both physical and less tangible aspects of the research setting, and therefore requires the use of multiple research tools informed by differing methodological frameworks. Ontologically, the project assumes an object-oriented approach, and encourages a flattening of any perceived hierarchy among subjects, objects, subject-objects, and so on—these terms being mere place holders (Latour, 2004: 225). However, because the languages of these other-than-humans cannot easily be transcribed, I have gathered the bulk of my data from other means, including archival and historical material found both in independent databases and in the on-site Alcatraz library. In trying to understand the significance of the Alcatraz gardens in particular, the guiding frameworks have been applied while interacting with, interviewing, and observing various people who work as volunteers in the gardens. This was done with the understanding that these are the individuals closest to the emergent processes of meaning-making which are occurring as the gardens are continually being physically and discursively unfolded and shaped, given significance, and interpreted individually and collectively. Interviews are referred throughout this paper as either (Interview 1) or (I1). I engaged in repeated participant observation of the volunteer-led garden tours, focusing on how the gardens are represented by what the tour docents say, and I refer to these observations as either (Observation 1) or (O1). I consider both verbatim statements as well as summaries of the stories they tell and the things they do. Approximately once every two weeks I was able to participate in some of the garden maintenance work itself, and I was also invited to participate in a barbecue dinner and overnight stay on the island,

which were organized as a gesture of appreciation to all garden volunteers. This gave me the opportunity to experience a ranger-led tour of lesser-seen parts of the island, to climb to the top of the still-functioning lighthouse, to sleep in a prison cell, and to spend additional time in the gardens during the hours at which the island is quietest. Finally, I took digital photographs throughout the duration of my fieldwork.

## Outline

The descriptions to follow are not to be seen as maps seeking to document or represent a stable, unchanging reality. They cannot be used to identify, or even less retrace, the trails which were walked in their compilation. Rather, they must be seen as *charts* tentatively sketching fluid networks, outlining ongoing events and recollecting stories and seeking to convey not one, but many versions of object realities. (Ren, 2011: 866)

For the gardeners working on Alcatraz, an important part of the success of the garden rehabilitation project has been to construct a coherent story around these spaces as they are today. In the development of something that is very much processual, rather than a completed product, palpability for the visitor requires situating the gardens today within a linear timeline: there are main characters, a golden age, a decline, the suspended state of near-loss, and the triumph of a strong return. But what I wish to do with this project is to consider the stories that are contained within, or suggested by, not the whole, but rather discrete points within the garden. It is my hope that by seeing these points, I can begin to answer some of the questions I have posed, and will pose, by exploring the parts of the garden that may or may not be in conflict with the coherency of the whole.

This paper proceeds first with a brief history of the island, followed by a more detailed history surrounding the culture of cultivating gardens on the island. I then briefly outline the shifts in interpretive frameworks that have developed on Alcatraz since its initiation into the National Park Service. In chapter three I begin to engage more directly with the empirical findings and observations from my field work by taking up discussions on the roles of decay, docents, historical photos, movements and identities of volunteer gardeners, plants, birds, and more. The final chapter entails a broadening in perspective wherein I position these gardens in more explicit relation to some of the broader dynamics of the prison-industrial complex, shifting between various scales (in-the-garden, out-of-the-garden, past, present) of experience.

## 2 Foregrounding: site history and description

“Much of gardening is a return, an effort at recovering remembered landscapes.”  
(Pollan, 1992)

### General island history

Physically, Alcatraz Island is not particularly large. At 22 acres (9 hectares), the landmass is the still-visible top of a prehistoric greywacke sandstone hill that was gradually submerged by estuary flooding throughout the most recent period of deglaciation, a process that created what is now referred to as the San Francisco Bay (Saving the Bay, n.d.). The small island maintained a relatively inconsequential existence for much of human history. It was likely never a bountiful island, although it did support populations of birds and low-growing plants, which grew in a thin layer over the island’s deep mass of rock. As far as what is known, regional indigenous Americans did not pay much regard to the island; some sources say it was regarded as a place of bad spirits or banishment, others say it was visited infrequently for ceremonial purposes or to forage for the eggs of nesting seabirds. The earliest known naming of the island came in 1775 when a Spanish royal expedition was exploring the northern coast of California and came into the bay, which contains a number of small islands of similar composition. Acknowledging the abundance of seabirds in the area, one of the surveyed islands was given the name *La Isla de los Alcatraces*, typically translated as the Island of the Pelicans (although personal research suggests that *alcatraz* is a general term which refers to coastal seabirds of the Sulidae family—in any case, the island belonged to the birds). The process of naming is often dubious, and while the name may have initially referred to another nearby island, and while the number of California brown pelicans and other seabirds has dwindled in the San Francisco Bay Area, the regional reference has remained, and was eventually assigned officially by military authorities to the island now known as Alcatraz (Alcatraz Cruises, 2015).

Military development and habitation of the island began in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in conjunction with the rapid urbanization of San Francisco that occurred during the gold rush. Located 1.5 miles (2.4 km) offshore of the northern tip of the San Francisco Peninsula and directly in line with the newly named Golden Gate (the strait which is the only entrance into the bay from the Pacific Ocean), Alcatraz was considered strategically located to protect the booming economic activity occurring within the area. In 1854 the island became the home of the first lighthouse on the United States’ west coast, and within a few years was established as a military fort. The infantry barrack known as the Alcatraz Citadel became more fortified when the Civil War began, and it functioned as a war camp and unofficial prison for Confederate sympathizers and others who were considered dissident. With the end of the war and the advancement

of military technology, the island's fortifications were deemed obsolete and subsequently modernized. This included the construction of a brick cell house, built in 1867, as the detention of prisoners of war became the main objective (although this did not prevent the detention of Native American fathers from the Hopi nation, captured for resisting the requirement of sending their children to schools established by the U.S. government) (NPS, 2015).

Throughout the next several decades, the official designation of the island often shifted, but it remained clear that imprisonment would be the primary use of the land. During its years as a U.S. Military Prison, the facilities housed prisoners during the Spanish-American War, civilians moved from other jails that were destroyed in a 1906 earthquake, and later held conscientious objectors during World War I. In 1909, the island's main structures began to take on a form that is still recognizable today, with the construction of a concrete cell block. (This structure is now considered a historical prototype for what are today called super-maximum security, or supermax, prisons.) In 1933, the island and its facilities, which had previously been referred to as the United States Disciplinary Barracks, were transferred to the Department of Justice. The following year, after nearly a century of military activity, the island came under control of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), and for 29 years existed as U.S. Penitentiary Alcatraz Island before being finally abandoned as a place of war and punishment. Despite its relatively short duration, the images and associations produced during and about this stint as a place meant for penitence, a fortress for the country's hardest criminals, would come to subsume the island's reputation, its mythos for years to come.

After 1962, Alcatraz was emptied of inmates and effectively abandoned, due primarily to the high expense of running it, numerous escape attempts (some of which may have been successful), and also to changes in social context—the social and governing mentalities of the 1960's were much different than those present during the penitentiary's conception, which occurred during the Great Depression, the end of prohibition, and the era of J. Edgar Hoover's positioning as the first director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. By the time the prison closed, much of its mystique, and its reputation of being inescapable, had been lost. The grounds and its buildings lie empty, as surplus property of the federal government. This designation, in part, is what provided a basis for the decision of some members of the Bay Area's Native American community to initiate what would become a nineteen month occupation of Alcatraz. The occupation was the third and longest lasting attempt to establish Alcatraz as a cultural center for Native self-determination and resistance, and occurred during a time when many parties, including entrepreneurs, school children, nationalists, nudists, and more, were discussing and suggesting what ought to be done with the land and its facilities. Starting in November 1969, Indians of All Tribes used

their possession of the land to accomplish many things, including drawing attention to the long history of abuses of Native communities by the United States government, asserting their sovereignty, and communicating with other Natives and to the rest of the world via radio and other media. In June 1971, the activists that remained on the island were escorted off by federal marshals (Loo and Strange, 2000).

As a sort of compromise in the midst of extensive debate on what to do with Alcatraz, in 1972, ten years after the prison was closed, the island came under the control of the U.S. National Park Service (NPS), and became part of the newly-established Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). Through some processes of negotiation, it was decided that the structures of the prison would remain, and that the island would be open to the public as a national historic landmark and a destination for visitors from all over the world (Loo and Strange, 2000). Thus, the Alcatraz Island that the world knows today (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Arriving by boat, Alcatraz as it appears today (Photo by Llessica Chan).*

## A more detailed history of the gardens

Accompanying the island's complex history of programmatic changes is an equally complex series of physical changes. Some of the earliest changes include a series of explosions that created roads and level areas for buildings, and turned the island's smooth hills into sharp cliffs bordered by tide pools. Still, as Alcatraz's spatial boundaries remained relatively fixed, Alcatraz as an idea underwent a continuous process of transformation and expansion into something boundless. Stories and images of the island prompted the fascination and imagination of people all over the world, and encouraged many sensational storylines and images of military activity, criminality, incarceration, and punishment. As these programmatic and cultural developments were occurring, there were also changes occurring within the island's ecology and natural composition. In fact, just as there are eras corresponding to programmatic and physical changes in the island's use, there are also eras corresponding to the overall approach to natural elements within the island's landscape. During the first major phases of construction on Alcatraz, for example, the island's simple ecosystem was thoroughly disrupted. The nesting bird populations gradually disappeared (and did not return until after the penitentiary was abandoned), and the majority of what little native vegetation there was left was disturbed and displaced. This dynamic shifted further, however, as the island eventually became more and more inhabited.

Although the main purpose of Alcatraz was to house prisoners, these people were not the island's only residents. For the most part, men who worked on the island (initially soldiers, and later officers) also lived on the island. Furthermore, they were not alone—their families lived there too. During certain eras of the island's use, up to 300 civilians considered Alcatraz home, as women and children filled houses and apartments that were built on the island. It is less well-known and far less emphasized that paralleling the expanse of militarized and securitized infrastructure and activity was a network of something more civilian, of something civil, soft yet lively, that happens anywhere people build a home. A community center featuring a dance hall, a bowling alley and a gymnasium; fishing, roller skating with the wind and other outdoor games; a general store, a barber and a soda fountain shop; Christmas caroling and busy kitchens—all of these things made life on the island for the roughly 300 civilians difficult to distinguish from life in any bustling village. Crucial to this dynamic, and to the aesthetic of the island's landscape, were the gardens of Alcatraz, which have nearly always existed alongside the stark facilities of the prison, as simple testaments to the attempts of some of the residents to make the rock island more livable.

### Military fort

The history of Alcatraz from a horticultural perspective is as long and involved as the fort and prison's history. Before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, virtually all of the island's thin layer of top soil was cut away. However, ongoing efforts had been made to import soil from adjacent Angel Island and the Presidio for the purposes of constructing defensive mounds, reinforcing canon embankments, and less intentionally, to provide the literal foundation for a longstanding practice of gardening on the island. These imports brought with them the spores of a number of California native (mostly fern) plants that still grow on the island today. It was not long after the establishment of the Alcatraz Citadel that the island became landscaped in a tidy and meticulous, although challenging to maintain, style characteristic of military forts. Some of the earliest inmates on Alcatraz, imprisoned during the Civil War and known as "trustees", were responsible for creating many of the island's forms still visible today (walls, pathways, etc.). They were some of the island's first landscapers, often crossing into the roles of gardeners, roles given to them when the prison regime on the island actively encouraged vocational training and rehabilitation. At this time civilians on the island also enjoyed gardening, and as early as 1867 there were two gardens established on the summit near the Citadel. One of these, a Victorian style garden with roses, sweet peas, and lilies, was photographed in 1870 by the well-known English photographer Eadweard Muybridge.

Ten years later the construction of three Gothic-style houses was underway on the east side of the Citadel. These structures were intended as homes for officers, prompting the name that the area is still referred to by, Officers' Row. The foundations for these three homes included garden spaces—Officers' Quarters 7, 8, and 9 each had a terraced garden on their north side. Small patches of ornamental vegetation became integrated into several other pockets of land on the island, as well as into the window boxes of a number of houses. Around this time, the cultivation of gardens had become normalized on Alcatraz, which, despite its broader reputation, had been established as a home to some of its inhabitants. Gardens were now an undeniable component of the cultural life of Alcatraz Island (Mundus Bishop, 2010).

### Military prison

With the new century came a shift in the programmatic function of the island. This could be seen in the demolition of the Citadel (including its nearby gardens) and the construction of a new summit building, the modernized concrete cell house. And these changes were indeed seen, including from the mainland, prompting an additional shift in the U.S. Army's approach to the landscape of Alcatraz. As San Francisco grew, more and more residents of the city began to take notice of the island and to scrutinize it as a blight of the landscape of the Bay. Throughout the 1910's, the military incorporated climate-appropriate plants



into the island's terrain, for aesthetic purposes as well as for erosion control. These efforts loosely coincided with those of the California Spring Blossom and Wild Flower Association, who made an agreement with the military in 1924 to beautify Alcatraz and to give it the appearance of a garden. Many plants introduced to the island during these years are still prominent, including Monterey cypress, blue gum Eucalyptus, ivy, century plant, ice plant and nasturtium.

This era also saw the establishment of what came to be used as the center for garden operations for Alcatraz. Below the summit on the east side of the island, a path off the main road leads to a large terraced area previously occupied by the main hospital. The old hospital building was demolished, and in its place the military cultivated a new garden, referred to as the Rose Garden, which included a hothouse (replaced by a greenhouse a short time later) and a series of beds and paths (Figure 2). In the time before the transfer of Alcatraz to the BOP, it was primarily military inmates who cultivated the Rose Garden. When the transfer did occur, the nature of the crimes for which the new inmates were convicted also changed, resulting in a shift in how the inmates were handled. Regular access to the gardens by inmates ceased, but the degree of cultivation and care that had evidently gone into the numerous garden spaces appealed to Freddie Reichel, secretary to newly appointed Warden James Johnson. He began to take measures to insure that the spaces were maintained and even expanded, and it is due in large part to his efforts that the culture of gardening was not lost during the transition (Mundus Bishop, 2010).

#### Federal penitentiary

Freddie Reichel, who worked on Alcatraz between 1934 and 1941 as secretary to the warden, personally maintained the Rose Garden, a slope near his house, and at least one other small garden on the island. Through this he taught himself how to work outside, having had little prior experience with horticultural maintenance. With encouragement via correspondence with expert gardeners throughout California, Reichel tended the grounds, made moves to introduce and propagate new plants which would do well in the island's climate, and became an advocate of allowing certain inmates to do garden work. Reichel's dedication to Alcatraz's landscape was pivotal given his access to and oversight of the island as a whole, as opposed to inmates and officers' families, who were able to garden only in restricted and respective areas. Around the time of Reichel's employment, additional garden spaces were developed and maintained by civilians—two of the three homes in Officers' Row had been demolished, and the foundations of the houses were turned into gardens adjacent to the pre-existing garden spaces (Figure 3). The majority of civilian life became concentrated in the Parade Grounds, an expansive flat area on the south end of the island. Here, additional gardens were created, some by the children of officers.



*Figure 2. The rehabilitated rose garden, which is still used today as the center for garden operations. Also shown is the repaired water tower and the power plant (Photo by Llessica Chan).*

As time passed, gardens were also developed on the west side of the island, where inmates gardened for the first time since the days of the military prison. The most well-known of the few inmate gardeners was a man called Elliot Michener, who eventually became a full-time gardener on the island. He worked this way for eight years, expanding the west side gardens, constructing a toolshed and a birdbath, building and working in a greenhouse at the warden's home, introducing composting, greywater, and water catchment systems to the culture of Alcatraz gardening practices, and leaving behind a legacy for future horticultural enthusiasts to encounter. Michener's memory would come to impact the many aspects of the garden rehabilitation project as it is known today (Figure 4).

After the closing of the penitentiary in March 1963, the vast majority of activity on the island ended. Save for a few security guards, all the inhabitants were gone. Upkeep ceased as buildings and other built features were left to the elements, and processes of decay and corrosion caused by the wind and moisture of sea air intensified. Slowly, the birds began to return, accelerating processes of infrastructural decay. Plants that were able to survive without human caregivers became naturalized or hidden by overgrowth. It would be a number of decades before gardeners would return to the island.





*Figure 3. Officers' Row, facing north. Gardens are constructed both in the foundations of demolished houses, and in garden beds originally constructed to accompany the houses. The main cell house building can be seen to the west (Photo by Llessica Chan).*



*Figure 4. A photo of a photo of a part of Elliot Michener's garden. Located on the west side of the island, the bird bath in the printed photo can be seen replicated in the background (Photo by author).*

## Post-penitentiary

The project of opening Alcatraz Island to the public began in 1973 and necessitated intensive programs of assessment, cleaning, removal, stabilization, rehabilitation, interpretation, and management. Countless points were negotiated throughout the process of turning this dilapidated penitentiary into one of the United States' most visited cultural landmarks. The fact that the land now belonged to the National Park Service (NPS) greatly impacted this process, which began to emphasize accessibility, education, reflection, and diversity in usage of the spaces made available. Various programs were continually developed—soon a self-guided audio tour about the penitentiary era replaced ranger led tours of the main cell house, giving both rangers and visitors more freedom in their experiences of and approaches to the island. Physical modifications were also consistent as balances were sought between Alcatraz as a cultural resource, providing insightful visitor experiences, and Alcatraz as a natural resource, providing refuge for seabirds (Mundus Bishop, 2010).

In 1983, the island's vegetative elements began to receive more attention. Certain parts of the landscape that had become overgrown were tidied and maintained, and some volunteers amended certain areas with native plants. In the 1990's, areas identified as gardens were surveyed for surviving plants, and early versions of cultural landscape reports and cultural landscape inventories were completed. These documents aided in the initiation of a long process of building a case to assert the significance of these garden areas within Alcatraz's history. The trajectory of this research became clarified in 2003, when a partnership was created between the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), the Golden Gate National Park Conservancy (GGNPC), a non-profit organization that helps conserve and steward the GGNRA, and the Garden Conservancy, a non-profit that focuses on the preservation of outstanding gardens and landscapes in the United States. A selection of garden staff and a program for recruiting garden volunteers was established through this partnership, and this group of individuals began the implementation of a multiple-year stabilization and rehabilitation plan. This involved process began with the clearing of decades of overgrowth, the rediscovery of garden hardscape and the resetting of garden foundations. It continues today with the hosting of gardens tours and the consistent and attentive maintenance of several distinct garden areas throughout Alcatraz, as well as some aspects of the collective landscape of the island. Gradually, the Gardens of Alcatraz have been developing a strong reputation of their own.

## The Gardens of Alcatraz today

In December of 2010, a landscape architecture firm based in Colorado, commissioned by the NPS, published the *Alcatraz Island National Historic Landmark Cultural Landscape Report* (CLR). The chapters of this document cover site history, existing conditions assessment, landscape analysis, management issues, treatment recommendations, and implementation strategy. Although the condition of the gardens is only a small part of the report's overall focus, this report is the most comprehensive study of the past, present, and future of the island, and as such is one of the most foundational single sources of information in terms of situating Alcatraz as a place with a complex history, a dynamic present, and a protected and promising future. It is not the only external representation of the gardens, though, as they can be found featured in travel blogs, public television travel programs, garden tourism books and websites, and image hosting sites. Furthermore, there is a website for the gardens separate from that for the rest of Alcatraz Island that offers information on much of the garden's story, past and present, as well as a self-guiding brochure.

Every Wednesday and Friday morning, garden volunteers arrive to Pier 33, near San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf, before each day's crowd forms. They ride the early staff boat to the island, and while on the boat they receive their task assignments for the day from one of the three staff gardeners. On these days, the plant life that is otherwise thriving largely untended is answered to, and the garden's historicity is brought continually to the present. For a few hours every Wednesday, Alcatraz visitors may access the Officers' Row garden for a guided viewing, where at least one docent is present to share stories and historic photos and to answer questions. Every Friday morning, while the rest of the crew is tending to the plots, two of the volunteers, who have received specific training as garden docents, host tours. This involves a bit of recruitment and active encouragement of visitors on the Alcatraz dock, as the crowd that has just arrived slowly moves up the main road's first slope. The tour docents work in tandem, one in a leading position providing the main narration, and one in a supporting position at the back of the crowd, often answering questions. The two lead groups of visitors, most of whom did not know about the gardens before arriving on Alcatraz that day, over the island, passing by or through the main garden areas, including a number of areas that are not accessible to the public otherwise. The tour has a set route, pace, and narration, although every tour is different and especially varies depending on the volunteer in the lead position. Tours occur every Sunday morning as well, and generally the only volunteer in attendance on these days is the one leading the tour.





*Figure 5. Perspective on Alcatraz's layered history. The bottom layer shows brick that was the main material of the military era. Above this are concrete blocks from the penitentiary era, both topped off by a canopy of Monterey cypress (Photo by author).*

*La isla de los alcatrazes* is a place with many historical layers of use, apparent in the density of their physical traces—the untouched sandstone within, the red brick of the military fort, the grey concrete of the penitentiary, occupation graffiti, loose feathers, and roots to fill in all the cracks (Figure 5). As the soil is worked and re-worked, plots weeded and re-weeded, and stories told and re-told, the newly rehabilitated (according to the Gardens of Alcatraz blog, the Garden Conservancy gave the project “completed” status on June 30, 2014) Gardens of Alcatraz become more and more embedded as a part of the contemporary Alcatraz experience (Fritz, 2014). Indeed, although it is perhaps not yet possible to fully characterize or name it, the novelty of the accessibility of the gardens, and the mere opportunity to view, photograph, and talk about them, has pushed forward and renewed the mode of interpretation island-wide. More broadly, the addition of the garden program does something unusual in that it creates a bridge between two seemingly disparate worlds of tourism, namely penal tourism and garden tourism (although the terms “tourism” and “tourist” tend to conflict with the NPS’s principles), begging the question of what this suggests about what is possible with both gardens and prisons.

This paper is based on the claim that the rehabilitation of the Gardens of Alcatraz is part of the ongoing re-telling of the Alcatraz legacy (and more generally, therefore, of the legacy of the American prison system), and that, now more than ever, it is not just authoritative and authorial humans doing the telling. The aim is to adopt a relational approach to agency in order to understand how the addition of these rehabilitated spaces is making possible the formation of new relationships to, and new re-imaginings of Alcatraz and its gardens in particular, and American prisons in general. Therefore, it is necessary to consider (and then reconsider) specific elements of the gardens and their rehabilitation and maintenance processes.

### Shifts in interpretive frameworks

You'll walk in the footsteps of America's most dangerous criminals, and the men who guarded them. Hear their voices, and experience their daily lives when you tour the federal penitentiary. Although it's known as "the Rock," you'll be amazed at the island's natural beauty. Discover the secrets of its historic gardens. And keep an eye out for abundant bird life. But also, be on the lookout for the remains of a civil war fort, a 19<sup>th</sup> century stronghold that protected San Francisco Bay from potential invaders. And even after the notorious penitentiary closed, Alcatraz continued to make history. In 1969, in a bid for political recognition, American Indians claimed Alcatraz. Locate the signs of their occupation. Alcatraz—it's so much more than just a prison. (Field notes: Recorded introduction that plays on each boat arriving to Alcatraz, 4/3/15)

There have been numerous dominant interpretive frameworks guiding the processes through which visitors come to understand and internalize their experiences of the island, which have been outlined by Loo and Strange in the essay "'Rock Prison of Liberation': Alcatraz and the American Imagination". Starting at the time that Alcatraz became a public spectacle, open for anyone to experience, it is possible to identify gradual shifts in the presentation of "official" interpretation schemes of the island's history. Each framework, while perhaps not wholly distinct, is specific to a particular era defined by the developing management principles of the NPS.

From the early years of Alcatraz's reopening as a new site of cultural and historical interest, the approach by park rangers was to emphasize the multiple and lesser-known dimensions of the island's past. This certainly included aspects of its role as a federal prison, but included also narratives about its natural history, its uniqueness as the site of the Pacific coast's first lighthouse, and its many years as a military outpost. Increasingly, this was done to detract from the overemphasis visitors often placed on the relatively short period during which Alcatraz served as a penitentiary. The park's earliest rangers, who naturally had diverse interests in the way they wished to speak to the public about the island, often had

to resist the impact that various media and films like *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979) had on the public's psyche and expectations of what the prison would be (Loo and Strange, 2000: 42).

Because there was such a high level of interest in the history of the federal prison era, a self-guided cell house audio tour was introduced in 1987, a standardization which made it possible to organize a wider variety of interpretive programs. This came to include a "Meet the Authors" program that brought former inmates and prison employees to the island to speak with visitors about their experiences and memoirs (p43). Soon after, the NPS instated an art exhibit in which fourteen local artists were invited to interpret the island through an installation. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the installations were intended to provoke their audience, to refer to Alcatraz's past in a way that shed light on the present state of prisons, critiquing the power that the nation-state, and the BOP in particular, exhibited in inflicting and being complicit with acts of violence, harsh punishment, and death. Although the exhibit was allowed to run its course, it did raise concerns from the BOP, which initiated a series of negotiations with the NPS to produce a BOP-sanctioned permanent exhibit about "Alcatraz and the American Prison Experience" (p44). These two programs, "Meet the Authors" and "Artists on the Rock," for better or for worse, represented a shift away from the NPS's centralization of interpretive power, wherein the Service relinquished some degree of control to outside parties in allowing them to add to the visitor experience their interpretations of the island's history. (However this strategy did, in part, backfire as the subsequent BOP-NPS negotiations, resulting in the permanent exhibition, forced the NPS Chief of Interpretation and her staff to focus even more on the penitentiary era.) This shift, and especially the integration of the history of the Native American occupation of Alcatraz into the official interpretive framework, allowed the NPS to present its visitors with thought-provoking points that directly referred to the concepts of freedom, liberty, captivity, and so on (p46). The framework placed this part of Alcatraz's history within the larger context of "freedom-seeking" in American history, in part by aligning the passion and resistance exhibited by the Native activists with an array of purportedly widely shared national values (Strange and Kempa, 2003: 393). This suited the NPS well in their efforts to emphasize the island's diverse history and to provide rangers with different ways to engage with the public that did not involve the sensationalized imagery of the penitentiary. (The implications of this appropriation on the violence of state-sponsored heritage planning is beyond the scope of this paper.)

Still today, the framing of the Alcatraz legacy is not fixed; the "imaginative transformations" of this world-renowned place have not ended (Loo and Strange, 2000: 47). For instance, from September 2014 to April 2015, the island featured the art exhibition *@Large*, which included seven site-specific and immersive



installations from Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei. Weiwei, who designed the pieces despite being prohibited from leaving China to install them, focused his works prominently on prisoners of consciousness and used the stark settings to emphasize the realities of imprisonment. In doing so he brought the contemporary politics of confinement-as-punishment to the forefront in a place that is generally considered a museum, more than an active part of the prison-industrial complex. Simultaneous to this, the Gardens of Alcatraz are established as a central feature of many visitors' experiences of the island, and have for a number of years factored variously into the identities of the local volunteers who travel regularly to the island to maintain and promote them.

### 3 Destabilizing: ‘the deep satisfaction of finding things’\*

The problem is not that people remember through photographs,  
but that they remember only the photographs. (Sontag, 2003)

During my experiences moving through the past and present of Alcatraz, I felt called to pick out certain bits of imagery and information, and in this way the island seemed as if it were functioning as one large archive, with the gardens as a smaller archive inlaid. If this was a strange approach, it would have been difficult to recognize it as such, as it seemed I was not the only person approaching the island this way. Given the type of systematic work – combing through text and images, deducing information about the past based on the materials available – that was required for the garden rehabilitation to begin, and that there are established programs wherein certain objects within this island-wide collection are called upon for the purposes of gleaning information about the past, it is no surprise that this notion began to emerge for me. The coherency of the experience of interpreting this island-as-archive varies depending on location and scale. Certain records are easily interpretable, as if some master archivist had worked diligently to order certain bits of the past so that their stories were readily available. However not all parts of the archive are this way; the meaning of some piece of history might change depending on who is interpreting the archive, or perhaps something that seems coherent close-up becomes more difficult to make sense of in a wider context.

Within a cultural-historical geographical context, Mills considers the nature of “the archive” as it has been “variously re-defined, its material re-imagined and its inhabitants resurrected” (2013: 701). Alcatraz as an archive is “animated” and every day there are people on the island working to “bring the past to life”, work which is both “performative” and “political”. Mills argues that “the archive can play a role in producing ‘hybrid research’ within geography [...] creating synergies across themes of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’” (p702). Within any archive, decay and fragmentation have an inherent role, as well as experiences of loss (of meaning and material), and the welcoming of ghosts. Even an archive that appears bound to an island cannot be complete, and we should be suspicious of anything that suggests otherwise:

Can it be assumed, however, that an ordered archive necessarily should give rise to an orderly account based upon this order? Possibly the researcher needs to be suspicious of the apparent order, and instead to seek out ‘cracks’ in the façade: for misunderstandings, for other questions needing to be asked that the sources, in their neatness and completeness, arguably evade. (Lorimer and Philo, 2009: 229 in Mills, 2013)

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\* Steedman, 2001: 1164

This type of skepticism, of drive to “seek out ‘cracks’” and “other questions needing to be asked,” is certainly appropriate for counter-visual work. To be sure, the boundaries of this particular archive remain largely undefined, as each year historical objects that were removed from the island in the past are returned, many of them still marked U.S.P. AZ. Still, the legibility of certain aspects of Alcatraz’s history is something absolutely necessary for the sake of the island’s many visitors. However, despite this apparent legibility, in the fragmented archive that is Alcatraz, meaning can be salvaged only in pieces (Mills, 2013: 704).

“Memories fade,” says Ogborn, “and archives are fighting the decay and deterioration that time’s chemistry brings” (2004: 240 in Mills, 2013), and presumably are doing so, depending on the particular collector, with a specific politics in mind. Things become more complicated though, and negotiation becomes more necessary (and perhaps less resolved), when there are multiple collectors and interpreters working simultaneously.

#### Understanding decay, and docents

This type of complexity can be seen, for instance, in the various approaches to decay on Alcatraz. Here is a place where decay is never just one thing, but rather it is simultaneously uncovered, awoken, counteracted, allowed, overlooked, uncontrollable, and harnessed. In this case, how does one begin to interpret ruination and decay? It reveals something perhaps once seen to be static as processual; by its nature it is an indication of messy things becoming messier and even more complex.

Geographer Caitlin DeSilvey explores “the margin where the ‘procreative power of decay’ sparks simultaneous – and contradictory – sensations of repugnance and attraction (Bataille, 1993)” (DeSilvey, 2006: 320). I found some aspects of my own project, reflected also in some comments made by volunteers, to be similarly situated in this “margin.” Active decay in conjunction with “the obscure agencies of intrusive humans and non-humans transform the familiar material world, changing the form and texture of objects, eroding their assigned functions and meanings, and blurring the boundaries between things” (Edensor, 2005: 318 in DeSilvey, 2006). We can see the challenge of approaching decay in the self-contradictory words of one volunteer. While speaking about an early phase of the rehabilitation, they describe the experience of uncovering an old rock wall (Figure 6):

So when you find it, your first thought is, “Oh we need to restore it to the way it used to look.” So it’s kind of a no-brainer, it’s just your first response, for any of us I think is, we need to get it back to the way it used to look. (Interview 1)



*Figure 6. Repaired shed and terraced containment walls on the west side of the island (Photo by Llessica Chan).*



*Figure 7. This concrete railing runs along the eastern boundary of the Rose Garden. On the day this photo was taken, a portion of the railing had just been repaired by students from a regional university (Photo by author).*

Here we find an expression of enthusiasm about counteracting the effects of ruination, and how this counteraction is impulsive, a “no-brainer”. It is as if, in the process of rehabilitation, it is the matter itself that makes the decisions for the volunteer. Moments later, however, the same person explains that decay “is a reminder of what was here” (I1), and that they found one specific repair project “a little bothersome” in that it removed traces of decay and, thereby the past. Remarking on this type of “absent presence” (Ginn, 2014: 237) as conjured by the appearance of decay, seems to emphasize both the decay’s importance and its capacity to provide eulogy to what is now gone. Considered in tandem, these two statements speak to the necessarily selective, and indeed contradictory, nature of historical rehabilitation (Figure 7).

This apparent lack of coherency is paralleled in the built landscape of the island, and it seems that this material reality, this lack of uniformity, might best be navigated through flexibility, and allowing space for all the conflicting processes occurring simultaneously. At the same time that various groups of people are working to counteract decay, there are other contexts in which processes of decay persist, as they are allowed, overlooked, or uncontrollable. This lack of order is not always easy to resolve, and attempts to do so might require a series of negotiations and selections. Here we see one volunteer constructing boundaries as to which types of agencies are important or not:

What I’m trying to say is bringing it back to what it looked like and not taking too much consideration as to analyze the material which was used. Because it’s inert material, it’s just dead. If the plants and all, I agree that if you’re going to introduce something new, that would create a whole new different story because germination would be different, the insects would be different, it will attract something different, uh you don’t know what it would do to the other plants. So that I can understand, that you don’t want to change that. But this sort of construction stuff, I don’t see any reason why you can’t do it. (I5)

Unsurprisingly, many instances of this persisting ruination are found in the original infrastructure of the prison, in areas in which there have been no attempts to repair or restore. (In these spaces we might find certain plants thriving— despite, or perhaps because of neglect— or sea birds nesting, unconcerned about humans’ ideas regarding the ruined quality of their surroundings, Figure 8.) It is also possible, however, to observe a “next generation” of material decay in areas which have been altered since the prison has become open to the public, and particularly since the beginning of the garden rehabilitation project (Figure 9). Whether these instances are best categorized as “allowed,” “overlooked,” or “uncontrollable” is unknown. Regardless, they seem to communicate about how the persistence of particular (plant and animal) life, at least in these spaces, comes to impact, and perhaps take priority over, the appearance of the built landscape (Figure 10).





*Figure 8. The brick skeleton of what was once the prison warden's house. Most of the structure was destroyed by a fire during the Indians of All Tribes occupation, and remains this way today (Photo by author).*

DeSilvey tells us that “decay reveals itself not (only) as erasure but as a process that can be generative of a different kind of knowledge” (2006: 323). In the Gardens of Alcatraz, knowledge is generated, through decay and otherwise, and here some of the lessons we receive show us what it means to engage in care for life. In the space of the garden in particular, one important consideration in relation to decay is the role it plays in sustainable garden practices, such as the cultivation of high-quality compost. This act, which may be understood as a type of harnessing of the power of decay, is of utter importance on Alcatraz, where both hot composting and vermicomposting are practiced. During the initial clearing of overgrowth, garden volunteers were quickly overwhelmed with accumulations of vegetative waste. Because space is so limited, and removing the waste from the island is not feasible, it was necessary to begin a high efficiency composting system. The compost on Alcatraz has “a life of its own” (I1), according to one volunteer, who may be referring partially to the fact that it is known to win first place and “best of show” prizes at a local county fair. “People think it’s a little strange when I talk about it,” they continue, “but you end up having this very close relationship with the stuff that’s decomposing” (I1). Perhaps this is not surprising, as the compost is both the start point and the end point of life in the gardens.



*Figure 9. Stairs built during the rehabilitation project. Kenilworth ivy, which grows out of hard surfaces all over the island, can be seen growing from a crack. Whether the ivy is causing the crack, or taking advantage of it, is hard to tell (Photo by author).*

In his work, Hitchings explores the notion of “wellbeing” as something that, for the gardeners with whom he interacted:

...came from a kind of inability, or rather unwillingness, with regard to accounting for all the agencies evident in garden sites. [...] In one way there was much to prefer about certain fixed materials in these gardens. It was in this regard that they [private garden-owners] could think of their efforts as an artistic endeavour and the site could become a channel for their individual tastes and inclinations. Yet this was also an attitude that they had to resist, since another kind of wellbeing came from allowing things to be more open [...and being...] both actively involved and passively fascinated. (Hitchings, 2006: 376)

This is a state of duality that is also present in the minds of people working in the Gardens of Alcatraz, who, given their status as volunteers, may very well take this approach of passive fascination even more readily, as they let those who are perceived to be in charge “account[ ] for all the agencies evident”. This may be especially true for those who are unfamiliar with the details of the gardens’ past, who seem to prefer to work outside of historical context and to focus on the simple joys of being in these spaces as they are today. One volunteer in particular seemed to reside in this in-between space of activity and passivity, as he explains, “So I’m not *that* attached but, yes I, I would say I am dedicated to giving my

services here. And no it hasn't, it won't, it hasn't, it won't change me. The gardens won't get hold of me" (I5). (This is interesting in contrast to the inmate gardener Elliot Michener, who might have wanted people to think the opposite, that the gardens had gotten hold of him, and had changed him. This will be discussed further in chapter 4.)

This type of relational freedom, and the option to work outside of history, however, is not available for the volunteers who take on the responsibility of training and working as a garden tour docent. For these individuals we see a shift in the relationship to passivity and, arguably, the role of these individuals expands into something more profound as they become imbued with a certain type of power. It is a common dynamic, the kind that plays out in any guided tour setting where there is someone representing a place, speaking with authority, and providing some series of stories to a public audience. It is often the case that such a tour is the only opportunity the members of the audience will have to glean information about their surroundings, a fact which raises important questions about accuracy and authenticity. On Alcatraz, using a combination of historical photographs, oral accounts, a fixed route throughout the island, and dialogue with the audience, docents represent the gardens in a specific way.

And I think as docents, it's incumbent on us to tell the same story, the same kind of stories for people that are visiting so they come away with that. It brings the gardens to life for them. And I think that's the role of the docent, to bring this whole thing to life. (I1)

Even while maintaining a position of power, docents readily put themselves at the service of the gardens. Although they might say something like "Come to my gardens!" (Observation 4) in order to attract visitors, they position their own representations of the gardens in relation to importance of the many other people and plants involved, past and present.





*Figure 10. A narrow flower bed that runs along the eastern wall of the main penitentiary building. Here we find tended plants next to rust and erosion that, in this particular area, has worn through the prison wall. One ranger said, "Rust never sleeps!" (Photo by the author).*

## Photos as agents, and seeing

It would be untrue, a simplification, to say that before the historical rehabilitation, the gardens on Alcatraz were forgotten. Many who were familiar with the island knew that there had been a gardening culture, and traces of some of the more resilient plants were impossible to ignore, especially when their flowers were in bloom. Employees of Alcatraz after it was absorbed into the NPS, or anyone else who had a reason to visit the island regularly, could easily see the processes of growth and decay that were pronounced in particular areas, which required maintenance in at least a cosmetic fashion. The most vivid reminders of the gardens, aside from the foundations and plants themselves, come from a vast and fragmented archive of historical photographs that exist of Alcatraz. This ambiguous archive includes some photos that date back to before the island had been developed at all, and also includes many images of gardens throughout the various eras of the island's use. These images in particular have been central throughout the entire rehabilitation process. Initially, they served as evidence during the "case-making" process, wherein particular authorities had to be convinced that gardening culture, and the natural elements and built landscapes that it produced, were invaluable components of the island's heritage, and that their preservation was paramount. Once support and funding was secured, and the project was in motion, historic photographs were referred to constantly: as old hardscape was uncovered, as new vegetation was chosen and planted, and as greenhouses and sheds were rebuilt or repaired.

Still today, while the gardens are well-established, the historic photos are referred to endlessly, every time a garden tour is given. At every stop along the tour route, the lead docent shows the visitors several large and laminated prints of purposefully selected photos. The photos show either what a specific area looked like while the prison was still active, or it shows what it looked like before the garden rehabilitation began (Figures 11 and 12). In these spaces the photos orient visitors temporally and physically: "We're in this photo, right here" (O5); they justify appearances of the gardens today: "Photos like this that show us what gardens used to look like, what to plant" (O2), "The photo makes it easy to know what to plant" (O5), "We had the photographs that told us how we had to lay out the paths again." (I7); they enliven stories of gardeners of the past: "He's holding gladiolas in this spot, so we grow gladiolas here now" (O5); and they contextualize the current state of the gardens by allowing visitors to see how they looked before the project: "When we got here it was a total jungle" (O4), "Photo has a tree in it, historically it wasn't there, had to get permission from NPS to remove it" (O5). Further, as the work progresses, historic photos may continue to impact the gardens in new ways, simply through the provision of additional evidence that certain areas of the island were once gardens. As evidence of this type continues to surface, it brings with

it the potential for additional rehabilitation projects in the future: “Any gardener knows a garden is never finished. [...] Photos keep popping up. The gardens aren’t finished.” (O5).



*Figure 11. The use of historic photos during a docent-led garden tour, part 1 (Photo by author).*

Such a relationship between the gardeners, not to mention the visitors, and the physical material of the photographs is a defining characteristic of historical restoration. It distinguishes this garden from many others, in that its appearance is not simply a matter of aesthetics or personal tastes. With this comes a shared sense of reverence for the images, and for the history they represent.

I feel like it’s hard for visitors to understand the transformation. You know you can tell someone that oh yeah, Officers’ Row used to be covered in weeds, and then you show them that photograph of the big cypress tree, and you show them the stump and it’s like, oh ok now I can really contextualize the project, like all the work that we’ve done here. So I think that’s probably, that contextualization is probably the best thing that ...that the photographs can do. (I4)



And so I show that photograph and I say, it's easy for you to believe, I hope, that the area behind me was a green lawn. See in this picture? You can figure that out. But now, turn around. And they're facing, you know, 15 feet high mirror bush, and figs, and blackberries, and snowy egrets, and I say look! This was a lawn! You could see straight across here to San Francisco. (17)



*Figure 12. The use of historic photos during a docent-led garden tour, part 2 (Photo by author).*

Speaking candidly, the volunteers readily, even enthusiastically, attribute agency to the historic images. As they are used in the tours, the photos repeatedly elicit responses of surprise and awe from the crowd. Certain images are met with small choruses of “wows” and “woahs,” and people are often compelled to take photos of the photos. Through consistent reference to images, and through the repeated use of practiced words, the importance of the volunteers’ work becomes less central, and what develops is a type of visuality specific to the rehabilitation project. The historical photos that are consciously used during the garden tours generally contain images of tidy, antiquated landscapes, or of serene civilians or docile prisoners. When visitors take photos of these photos (or even if they do not), these images are duplicated, taken home with the visitors, and gradually internalized. Their significance as a crucial detail

of Alcatraz's history becomes, in the words of Schept, constructed, legitimized, and normalized. Schept cautions that "scholars have recognized a similar relationship between photographic portrayal and hegemonic representation" (p216). Specifically, Carney uses the term "social practice of production" (2010: 18 in Schept, 2014) to refer to the ways in which a photograph "presents more than represents, produces more than reproduces and performs more than it signifies ... the photograph performs in a field where the material realities of cultural practices in the field of power and desire are at stake" (2010: 31 in Schept, 2014). In the context of the Alcatraz garden tours as a cultural practice, the photographs are being enlisted for a very particular performance, one that does indeed involve the material realities of power – the power to portray prisons in a particular fashion – and desire – the desire to see prisons in a particular fashion.

Interestingly, the historic photos provide more than just insight into past gardens, and justification for how the gardens look now. By witnessing the plants that were grown in the past, and the plants that are possible to grow now, they also create a sense of contrast that emphasizes the relative severity of California's drought. This offers to the historical rehabilitation project a stronger sense of contemporaneity with the present, and shows simple acknowledgement of, and simple adjustments to, its requirements. There is a compelling parallel here regarding the origin of penitentiaries. In her book *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Davis tells us that the historical conditions which deemed such institutions necessary and useful are no longer relevant. We are using (and expanding) technologies of punishment that are based on societal realities and standards that are long gone: "We should therefore question whether a system that was intimately related to a particular set of historical circumstances that prevailed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can lay absolute claim on the twenty-first century" (Davis, 2003: 43). Although plant species that require a lot of water may have worked in the gardens of the past, when water use on Alcatraz was unregulated, it is clear enough that they do not work in the gardens of today. The solution here seems simple enough – begin to search for and apply alternatives.

### Who speaks, and how

One of the most important resources that a garden makes available for use is the gardener's own body. A garden gives the body the dignity of working in its own support. It is a way of rejoining the human race. (Wendell Berry, source unknown)

Of course it is not only the photographs that give meaning to the gardens. Meaning also unfolds through the bodily movements of the gardeners, as they individually and collectively practice the acts of gardening. The author and landscape architect Anne Whiston Spirn tells us that, "Most people do not consider making a garden as speaking, and do not begin to garden by reflecting on what they want to say, and yet,



nonetheless, they are speaking, even praying, through their gardens” (Spirn, 2008: 192-193). If indeed the act of gardening is itself a way of speaking, then messages conveyed by the volunteers on Alcatraz must somehow be relevant to the site. Their movements, singular and collective, are telling us something about, perhaps, the climate of the San Francisco Bay, about the lack of private yard space in the city, about the politics of National Parks, and about what a prison is for. They are also communicating more personal messages, for example, about passion for a lifelong hobby, about what it means to be a volunteer, about how it feels to be seen by the public, about a body that aches despite the mind’s enthusiasm, about the wonderment of learning about plants, and so on. However, it is not just humans that are speaking through the gardens. These are spaces of cacophony, with many voices and many messages to be heard (Figure 13).



*Figure 13. Still shot of the motions of volunteering in the Gardens of Alcatraz (Photo by author).*

As if bidding us to listen with more patience, Hitchings finds that, “The garden could never be fundamentally considered as the outcome of their [the gardeners’] own actions, as the experiences that emerge from these quite literally, ‘fascinating’ sites encourage people towards a bemused and enjoyable inability with regard to understanding the array of places where authorial agency could lie” (2006: 376). We see this in the Alcatraz gardens in the different ways that volunteers diminish the significance of their work—through the emphasis on the authority of historical precedent, through the stories of plants that survived without human caretakers, and also through their own self-identification as a gardener, or their lack thereof. Some volunteers have very straightforward assertions as to what it takes to be a gardener: “I am a gardener in that I love to garden” says one volunteer (I1). “Um I mean I have gardens. So I garden. [...] I’m not a particularly good gardener, but I like doing it” says another (I2). There is also a sense that going through the motions of gardening, expressing this type of physical language, does not necessarily make someone a gardener. When asked whether they consider themselves a gardener, one volunteer said, “Nope, just a volunteer. Just a gardening volunteer you know, you don’t need to know about gardens” (I5). When asked the same question, another volunteer explained:

I’m not a dyed-in-the-wool gardener. Gardening is not a “passion” for me, at all. I tell people about my volunteer jobs and I say I work in the gardens on Alcatraz or I am a gardener on Alcatraz, and so yeah I use the word. [...] As I said I tag along on it and I really like that. So I’ve learned a lot out here, and that’s great. And you know I enjoy whatever I learn, but it hasn’t changed my life. (I7)

Indeed, it seems that people are more likely to claim that they are just following directions, than they are to claim that they are honing skills in a manner which warrants the title “gardener”. As one volunteer explained, while they may be able to tell when one plant species looks nice next to another plant species, they would have no idea about whether such a hypothetical juxtaposition would result in one plant killing the other (field notes, 22/4/15). This kind of admission suggests that if there is some concentration of authorial power, it is more likely to be shared between different plant species than with the role of the individual human.

Despite their commitment to the place and to their work, some volunteers easily dismiss the significance of their position, and the possibility of having any explicit influence on the appearance of the gardens. In at least one humorous instance, the volunteer responsible for the completion of a specific part of the project claims to prefer not to be associated with his work. In this instance, the volunteer was leading a garden tour and sharing their experience about uncovering and repairing a terraced rock wall. The wall was originally constructed using relatively ragged pieces of rock that were fit together to create the primary containment. These rocks were topped off with pieces of brick in a way that made the top of the



containment wall horizontally level. During the excavation of this wall, among the pile of rubble, the volunteer also found a few smooth river rocks. They learned that the inmate who originally built the wall chose to add some extra detail by fixing the smooth rocks to the top of the completed wall (Figure 14). “It’s historic restoration,” the volunteer emphasized, who doesn’t agree with the aesthetic, but had to do it that way. However, they say they “won’t take credit for it” (O1).

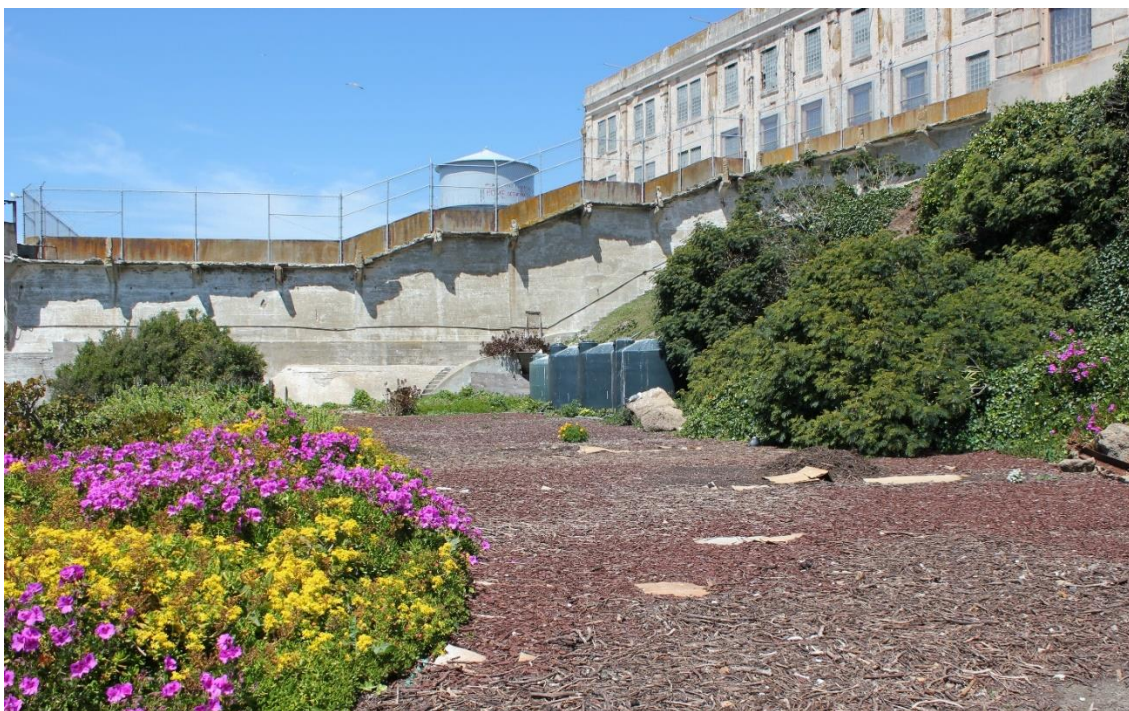


*Figure 14. A rehabilitated rock wall terrace (Photo by Llessica Chan).*

In other cases, such a relinquishing of personal effort is not voluntary. There are almost comic instances where human effort is somehow undermined. Sometimes this happens in a way in which the volunteers seem happy to permit, while other times it must be more frustrating. In one flat area on the west side of the island, there was historically a tidy, expansive lawn of some perennial grass common in landscaping. During rehabilitation, after the long process of clearing this area of its overgrowth, a double layer of sheet mulching was applied over the area, which undoubtedly still contained parts of root systems, and perhaps dormant plants and seeds. Sheet mulching is a technique to control weeds and to implement soil, and typically involves the layering of cardboard and organic matter, such as compost, hay, or slashed



vegetation, over the entire surface of a given area, and is generally topped off with woodchips. The cardboard and organic matter is meant to gradually break down and become integrated deeper and deeper into the soil, a process that works best when there is consistent moisture. Given the lack of rain and limited access to water on the island, it seems the technique in this context is not working as well as it might in others. Dry cardboard can sometimes be seen curling up away from the soil, emerging from beneath the woodchips, making it easier for plants to grow above the surface. The intention for this area is to allow a lawn of native sedges, planted at one end of the flat expanse, to propagate and spread over the entire area and establish itself. Until this happens though, rogue plants still emerge through the layers of sheet mulching. During my first examination, I noticed a small blackberry vine had emerged. Weeks later, I saw that where the first vine may have been removed, new smaller vines had taken its place. Additionally, a small amount of California poppy foliage had also emerged, remained, and eventually produced flowers (Figure 15).



*Figure 15. Successful sheet mulching requires consistent moisture. Here a small California poppy bush has breached the layers of mulch and, perhaps unsurprisingly, has been left to flower (Photo by Llessica Chan).*

Indeed, there is something inherently unstable about the character of a garden. Anyone familiar with the upkeep of one will recognize this, and upon recognition will likely accept it and happily continue with their work, recognizing further that they will never have full control over what transpires. Hitchings suggests

that it requires a certain type of skill to “find a way of simultaneously taking charge and ceding control” and that “exploring the ways in which these contradictions are lived out” is suggestive of “the potential in ethnographically examining the benefits associated with certain habituated human approaches to taking charge” (2006: 377). The gardeners on Alcatraz seem to be well attuned to this type of skill, to the degree that they feel comfortable sharing their recognitions:

A lot of what we do is “try it, see what happens.” (O5)

Now a lot of it is maintenance and seeing what works in really difficult conditions. (I3)

It’s a project that is...just barely within our control. (I7)

This final sentiment was expressed within the context of describing the merits of the structure and functioning of the volunteer program itself. Perhaps this structure is the arena in which the skill, as described by Hitchings, originates. Each person working in the garden, whether they are a paid staff member or a volunteer, has a role—many of the volunteers are stewards of a particular region of the gardens—and with this comes an implied understanding of how and when to “tak[e] charge” and how and when to “ced[e] control”, in relation to both the gardens, and to one another.

#### Plants, and sometimes a few birds

Before the military became interested in it, human activity on what is now referred to as Alcatraz was rare. Seabirds had, for many generations, been the most successful colonizers of the island. After the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, constant human activity on the island repelled any seabirds from successfully nesting there. (It is likely that the birds continued to try for some time to nest, and it is vaguely rumored that soldiers or officers would, at times, shoot the birds. Whether or not this is true, it is no wonder that eventually the birds no longer visited Alcatraz.) Things continued this way until the year of the penitentiary’s closure. Gradually, the birds began to return undisturbed, and in the years during which the island was abandoned, they again were able to nest there. Now, with the island’s designation as a National Historic Landmark within the NPS, Alcatraz also functions as a bird sanctuary. Before the rehabilitation of the gardens, Alcatraz had already been established with this title, serving as mating and nesting grounds for colonies of Brandt’s cormorants, snowy egrets, black oystercatchers, Canada geese, black-crowned night-herons, pigeon guillemots, and of course the western gulls. (Strangely, and also sadly, there have recently been sightings of a single northern gannet, which is believed to be the only one living anywhere outside of the Atlantic Ocean.)

Once efforts to rehabilitate the gardens began, so too began a series of negotiations about how to do so without completely upsetting the birds, or the biologists who looked after them. These negotiations involved considerations of the definitions, significance, and management requirements of natural resources in contrast with cultural resources. The gardens were designated as a cultural resource, as they had been a product of the people living on the island, and once they were re-established, they persisted among a backdrop of subtle tensions between the habits of birds and the practices of gardening. Each year between February and September, certain parts of the island are off-limits, including to employees, as these are the months during which the seabirds are present and most active. They arrive *en masse* and engage in (sometimes alarmingly noisy) processes of mating, nesting, defending territory, and rearing. This makes moving through already established garden spaces sometimes difficult, and makes the rehabilitation of certain additional garden spaces nearly impossible.



Figure 16. Metal wire cages placed over plants, to prevent nest-building seagulls from uprooting them before they have had a chance to become established (Photo by author).



Hitchings tells us that “in the experienced gardener’s garden, one significant benefit that can flow from living vegetation is associated with allowing yourself to abstain from the authoritative position of being the person in charge” (2006: 378). It is not just vegetation that can provide this benefit. Sometimes, at least on Alcatraz, it is for the sake of the vegetation that the gardeners assume even more of an “authoritative position”. As western gulls are constructing their nests, they tend to pull small bits of vegetation off of various plants in the area. Generally this is not an issue, but if a plant is not already well-established, the gulls may easily uproot the whole thing. To prevent this, it is common for the gardeners to protect young plants using metal wire shields (Figure 16). Indeed, Hitchings continues by telling us that “it would be wrong to assume that this [...] attitude [of abstinence...] is always easy to embrace” (*Ibid*).



*Figure 17. Healthy ferns in a hard to reach place (Photo by author).*

As much as the gardeners may assist the plants in certain ways, in many instances it seems to be the case that some of the plants do very well on their own. This may be, in part, due to the fact that they have had an entire abandoned prison island, with all its cliffs, crevices, surfaces, and slopes, available to them. Brown, referencing Latour, writes that in spaces like this:

Plants, no longer objects, become subjects acting on space, pulling the attention of walls, stones, birds, and steel, retrofitting place ... getting the prison to do and become things for them ... a ladder to the sky, a passageway for expansion, a site for unbridled sex and reproduction, seasonal conquest, a teeming, silent parliament of things. (Brown, 2014: 71)

On Alcatraz, a degree of ambiguity has developed as to where the “gardens” end and the rest of the “grounds” begin. Plants selected for by gardeners are very commonly found growing outside of the boundaries of the gardens, sometimes finding success in the oddest of places (Figures 17 and 18). During one garden tour, a visitor asked the leading docent, regarding the mature ivy which grows throughout the island, “Is it your friend or your enemy?” to which the docent responded, “Yes it is” (O3). The docent went on to explain that while the ivy does help prevent erosion of the island’s sandstone, it contributes to erosion of the concrete, and it also requires a lot of trimming. In many areas, ivy cannot be removed because it has begun to grow into walls and foundations, and taking down the ivy would mean taking down the built materials as well. So here again is an example where conflicting and attractive elements exist side by side, entangled with one another, literally growing and decaying into and out of one another. And here again is an ambiguous case, where it is difficult to know whether the ivy is causing the foundations to weaken, or merely taking advantage of material that was already weak (Figure 19).



*Figure 18. Kenilworth ivy that established itself inside a building. It is growing from a crack in the ceiling, toward the sunlight coming through the window (Photo by author).*





*Figure 19. This ivy has been growing here for so long that some of the interior crevices of this concrete railing have become filled with thick, woody stems (Photo by Llessica Chan).*

## 4 Discussion and conclusion

If wildness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world – not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both. (Cronon, 1995)

This then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was. (Sebald, 1998)

‘There but for the grace of God’

In July of this year, U.S. President Barack Obama extended commutations to 46 non-violent drug offenders who, according to Obama, had served sentences disproportionate to their crimes. They will be released from their respective prisons in November of this year, bringing the President’s total number of presidential commutations to around ninety, more than the last four presidents combined (Democracy Now!, 2015). Days later, Obama entered El Reno Federal Correctional Institution in Oklahoma, marking the first time a sitting president has ever visited a federal prison. Here he walked through some parts of the premises, stepped inside a 9-by-10 foot (2.7-by-3 meter) cell, and met with six non-violent drug offenders for approximately 45 minutes. During a press conference inside the Institution, he said:

Visiting with these six individuals, [...] when they describe their youth and their childhood, these are—these are young people who made mistakes that aren’t that different than the mistakes I made and the mistakes that a lot of you guys made. The difference is, they did not have the kinds of support structures, the second chances, the resources that would allow them to survive those mistakes. And, you know, I think we have a tendency sometimes to almost take for granted or think it’s normal that so many young people end up in our criminal justice system. It’s not normal. It’s not what happens in other countries. What is normal is teenagers doing stupid things. What is normal is young people making mistakes. And we’ve got to be able to distinguish between dangerous individuals who need to be incapacitated and incarcerated versus young people who are in an environment in which they are adapting, but if given different opportunities, a different vision of life, could be thriving the way we are. That’s what strikes me. There but for the grace of God. And that, I think, is something that we all have to think about. (Goodman, 2015)

President Obama’s commutations, and the fact that he even entered El Reno, certainly have important implications about the ways people are seeing prisons. These acts are a reflection of a widespread confrontation with the failures of the criminal justice system in the U.S.—never before has it received such unanimous critique. In addition to sweeping gestures of bipartisan prison reform among high-ranking politicians, there is, to be sure, a vast network of activists addressing penitentiaries, and the need for abolition and alternatives, in countless ways.

Obama's words, spoken while surrounded by the walls of a prison, suggest that we are all, including those imprisoned, the resulting outcome of countless interplaying agencies—he calls them “structures,” “second chances,” and “resources.” However his reasoning here seems to stop short, as he emphatically draws a line between people who are in prison after being convicted of non-violent crimes, and those who are convicted of violent crimes. (This is not entirely unlike some of the negotiations regarding control, and the drawing of boundaries, that are occurring in the minds of gardeners.) Certainly, just as there are “structures” which help some people stay out of prison, there are “structures” which make it impossible for others to avoid it. Brown insists that:

...punishment is always a narrative about a chain of pain, one whose origin is not easily traced. The fact that contemporary imprisonment occurs against a backdrop of structural conditions of poverty and vast race and class inequalities, containing within it an immense number of narratives of pain and abuse, where perpetrators and victims bleed together, does little to challenge this fundamental logic of retribution. (Brown, 2009: 9)

She continues, in reference to someone whose primary way of relating to a prison is to gaze freely at it from without:

The remoteness of the penal spectator instead guarantees that his imagining of punishment is haunted by abstract potentialities of danger and insecurity. And this spectator as cultural agent is a formidable force in the construction of pain. In gossip and conversational chat, as well as media and political commentary, the exploration of inflicted pain as nothing other than an appropriate and desirable response to other people's pain and violence is a contemporary cultural requisite. (*Ibid*)

The assertion that a penal spectator is a cultural agent has crucial implications for what it might mean to see the rehabilitated Gardens of Alcatraz, to see them being tended by people, and to translate what is seen as a cultural agent into cultural meaning and then into action. It is almost beyond doubt that, not just being spectator to, but rather witnessing these simple scenes, produces a trigger in the minds of some people, leading them to realize, perhaps, that they do not understand what a prison is, and also, perhaps, that whatever prisons are, however dehumanizing they are, they do not have to be.

### The Insight Garden Program

“...gardens reflect prevailing social relations of power, culture, race, class and gender, and there are significant social and environmental consequences connected to the way we garden.” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2010: 499; this statement is also true if “garden” is replaced by “im/prison”)

A strong example of agency translated to action may be located just across the Bay, almost directly north of Alcatraz Island. Here, San Quentin State Prison has been operating since 1852, making it the state's oldest prison. It is also the location of the only death row for incarcerated males in California. And as of



2002, it is also the location of the Insight Garden Program (IGP), a collaborative non-profit program which, according to their website:

...facilitates an innovative curriculum combined with vocational gardening and landscaping training so that people in prison can reconnect to self, community, and the natural world. This “inner” and “outer” gardening approach transforms lives, ends ongoing cycles of incarceration, and creates safer communities. (Insight Garden Program, 2015)

The IGP approach uses “the latest neuroscience research on learning strategies” in combination with “experiential gardening” as a way to encourage “big picture shifts that can last a lifetime” (*Ibid*). The approach seems to be successful. The website claims that among those inmates who have participated in the program, fewer than 10% return to prison. Certainly this is a significant difference from the, at minimum, 65% of California inmates that return to prison within three years of being released (California Innocence Project, 2015). The IGP coordinates volunteers, and has even co-organized a Green Career Fair on site. A large part of the program’s focus is on their efforts to expand to other prisons throughout California and the rest of the country, which seems to be gradually happening. The chair of IGP’s board of directors is quoted on the website as having said, “This, truly, is the beginning of a new era in prison reform.”

#578AZ

The IGP is not the first to have recorded the benefits that gardening can provide during times of confinement. Precedent for this occurs throughout Alcatraz’s long history. There are a small number of individual historical figures whose images and stories are called upon again and again by the Alcatraz garden volunteers, particularly those who also volunteer to lead garden tours. One of these individuals is Freddie Reichel, aforementioned secretary to the warden from 1934 to 1941, who is known as the first person to initiate the continuance of island-wide landscaping and gardening practices as established during the military era. Another is a woman referred to as Mrs. Casey, the wife of the medical officer, who kept a garden in Officers’ Row. There is also Edna Swope, the wife of the penitentiary warden from 1948 to 1955. She is responsible for a number of garden-related initiatives throughout the island, including the repurposing of a military-built wall that at the time held cannonballs, which Mrs. Swope had replaced with geraniums (Figure 20). She is also known for having developed a friendship with Elliot Michener, who was known within the prison system as #578AZ, but is now better known as the inmate gardener of Alcatraz.



*Figure 20. Mrs. Swope's planter, where geraniums replaced cannonballs. Another instance of a new layer built atop an older one (Photo by Llessica Chan).*

Michener revisited Alcatraz in old age, unfortunately before the garden rehabilitation had begun. He was, however, interviewed at length about his reflections on constructing and working in the gardens, during which he said the following:

The hillside provided a refuge from disturbances of the prison, the work a release, and it became an obsession. This one thing I would do well...If we are all our own jailers, and prisoners of our traits, then I am grateful for my introduction to the spade and trowel, the seed and the spray can. They have given me a lasting interest in creativity. At eighty-nine, I'm still at it. (Beatty, 1996: 58)

Notable for their poeticism and relatability, these words are often replicated—in books, on the Gardens of Alcatraz website, and at the end of every garden tour. Whether the lead docent has them memorized, or has to read them aloud, Elliot's words are some of the last that participants of the garden tours are left with. Visitors are often also told that after he left Alcatraz, Elliot went on to work as landscaper at a golf course, where he was able to apply what he had taught himself during his imprisonment.

### Ghosts in gardens

Here, I feel, it is important to raise points of caution, related generally to the potentially “haunting effects of reanimating past lives through biographies” (Mills, 2013: 703). Indeed the fact that Michener's name is known and spoken by almost everyone volunteering in the gardens, makes it seem as if his ghostly presence is in the gardens still today. There is no doubt that he crosses the minds of some volunteers as they are working—maybe pruning the fig tree, tidying around the bird bath, straightening a rock wall—

and perhaps wondering whether Elliot performed these same motions in the same locations during the years he was imprisoned (see DeSilvey, 2007a: 40-41 in Mills, 2013).

Mills cautions us that “there are a series of ethical issues surrounding past lives and the co-opting of individuals into projects who cannot be asked to sign consent forms or agree to be cited” (2013: 707). Furthermore, for as much as Elliot is continuously given a voice, we must question who and what, in the process, is being inadvertently silenced. Brown’s words also suggest caution here, as she explains the risks of “heavy reliance upon individualized frameworks,” which is something often done in movies or television shows about life in prison (2009: 74). This type of approach “rarely effectively create[s] sociological connections between structure and agency, but instead pivot[s] precariously from the mundane conditions of prison life to pure spectacle” and does so “in a manner that rarely interrogates any of the social conditions driving violence, incarceration, or its social effects” (*Ibid*). This concern is relatable to the approach of IGP, which focuses heavily on changing individuals, but seemingly less so on changing the structures in which they are situated, aside from the addition of gardens. (Personally, I also hesitate to be enthusiastic with their claim about using “the latest neuroscience research”, as mentioned in the previous section.)

Sticking with Brown, but moving to her more recent work, she offers further caution about the general role of gardens and the way they, depending on the context, “express a dangerous collinearity with the vision of the penitentiary” in that they also involve dynamics of “ownership, enclosure, and a shifting balance between order and disorder” (2014: 75). She continues with words reminiscent of Foucault’s work on panopticism:

At its most diabolical, its [the garden’s] idealization mirrors the prison cell: a cloistered space in which to turn inward, to meditate upon the transcendent and the source of creation, and to be shut out of the civic domain. In its finest, most well-intentioned invocation, it is bound as we are. Even amid the breadth of possibilities that enclosure might take, from asylum to convent, enclave to sanctuary, these troubled paradises will always depend, to some extent, upon the privacy of the owner, the control of labor and property. (*Ibid*)

Projects like the IGP, as well as the commemoration of Elliot Michener and the ways in which he felt gardening had transformed him, require consideration from a dual perspective. In one sense, both projects entail a commendable approach towards promoting alternative ways in which punishment might be structured and understood. They challenge careless and dangerous preconceptions of criminality and of people convicted of crimes. At the same time, both projects effectively serve to further normalize the attempts of systematically controlling life, and to further normalize not just gardens in prisons, but prisons

in general. They validate the system of authority which determines whether and how individuals must be subjected to punishment and rehabilitation. While undoubtedly encouraging on some level, they can both be understood as minor gestures in the direction of “prison reform,” which are two words that “have been inextricably linked since the beginning of the use of imprisonment as the main means of punishing those who violate social norms” (Davis, 2003: 40). Consider here the words of Foucault:

One should recall that the movement for reforming the prisons, for controlling their functioning, is not a recent phenomenon. It does not even seem to have originated in a recognition of failure. Prison ‘reform’ is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme. (Foucault, 1979: 234 in Davis, 2003)

We can see that processes of reform are inherent to the function of a penitentiary, not just reform of the convicted criminals who reside within, but of the very system within which all penitentiaries are collectively located. This becomes more apparent when considering that prison reform is something which receives the support of people from a wide array of political persuasions. Many of the bipartisan reform efforts occurring today in the United States are, indeed, spurred by a widely shared interest among politicians in diminishing the fiscal burden of the prison system, often in order to reroute money to other security and police-related activities (Goodman, 2015). Perhaps it is the case that no matter what reforms are made, it is impossible to dissolve the link between places of imprisonment and violence. More than forty years ago, the work of sociologist Robert Martinson has told us that, in the world of rehabilitation and prison reform, “nothing works” (Martinson, 1974: 22-54 in Brown, 2014). Given all that has changed since then, for better or for worse, should we heed this conclusion? Many, it seems, are undeterred.

### The Alcatraz gardens as living critique

Perfect resistance. These gardens, scattered across the abandoned sites of public encounter, defy conventions, economies, psychologies, politics, and humans in general. This garden may be a revolutionary. An abolitionary outlaw when hired into the spaces of power and knowledge. (Brown, 2014: 72)

Despite any valid critique of the Gardens of Alcatraz program, there is still counter-visual work occurring here, as the project continues to bring people into some of the more gentle folds of the prison-industrial complex, both allowing and forcing them to see prisons in a new way. Some of the volunteers, for instance, are people who otherwise would likely not give prisons as much serious consideration, and a number of them, while working on Alcatraz, took advantage of an offer to take a tour of nearby San Quentin State Prison. It is the kind of work that is capable of transforming some peoples’ long-held values and beliefs— if not about prisons, then about other ways of regarding living things. One volunteer, when asked if they had a favorite plant, said:

No I don't have really particular favorite plant. [...] It changes you know so... No, I like flowers as [flowers], which I wasn't really fond of in the beginning because I thought it was a total waste of time and energy and money. Ah, I thought, you cut them down and you export them and you sell them and it goes like this, it's a waste basically. But then, because I was working with the native plants most of the time, I realized that you know, flowers and plants, ornamental plants, have been in existence for so long and, people like them, appreciate them, they're different. So, ever since I started liking them. (O5)

These prison gardens also maintain their transformational potential for the simple fact that they challenge visitors' limited expectations of what it means to experience places of punishment. There is an element of surprise that is inherent to the contrast between the abandoned prison (and the set of expectations that arise in preparing to visit it) and the thriving gardens. And the moment in which people witness the contrast is a moment in which new possibilities emerge; there is something like a rupture in peoples' stereotypical positions as penal spectators, and therefore as cultural agents—one visitor, during a garden tour, seemed to experience an overwhelming moment when they burst out, “This is crazy, I didn't know this existed!” (O4). These kinds of exhilarating experiences, as they occur against the backdrop of an abandoned prison, even as they are still mediated by state-sanctioned visibility, make the tensions of the contrast more pronounced. Minca and Ong argue that the spatial arrangements of prisons, even when empty of their prisoners, retain the “socio-spatial qualities (and difficult memories) of past violence perpetrated within and, at times, thanks to their spatial arrangements” (Minca and Ong, 2015: 2). Transitioning a space of punishment to a space of care (gardens) or leisure (NPS activities, volunteer gardening, art exhibits, overnight visits) does not eliminate their connections to past and present violence (elsewhere) or their potential to enact control or even violence upon minds and bodies. But it does create novel opportunities for considering these connections, and for acting upon their implications.

And these types of opportunities are valuable, regardless of how, when, or from where they come. Schept reminds us that “our vocabularies of perception and our ‘visual language’ of the carceral moment are limited to the familiar and predictable refrains” (2014: 203). But when these tired, painfully contemporary prison tropes are combined with the enchantment of ancient and awoken garden myths, something entirely different may occur (Figure 21).





*Figure 21. This gate once separate the inmate garden from the rest of the prison grounds. It is now laden with the ice plant known as Persian Carpet, and the gate can no longer be closed (Photo by Llessica Chan).*



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