

Time

A site essay from Biotic Portal at Strawberry Creek (bioticportal.com), a collaboration with poet Denise Newman and the UC Berkeley Botanical Garden funded by a Creative Work Fund grant, 2016

In this living museum of plants, the dirt and dust that are actants in this ecosystem along Strawberry Creek settle on the signage. The botanical names are in Latin, but part of the name often rings straight through from colonial times: European names in genitive form, denoting “of”: *henryi*, *parkeri*. A museum then with a period stigma, an outdoor replica of a room of polished European furniture, say, owned hundreds of years ago by successful capitalists. In moments of recognition here, memory trails of cruelty and control open to the repercussions alive in present time.

Visitors seem more drawn to timelessness. Green light through the foliage of dawn redwoods streaks moss and creek, resurrects primordial time, preconsciousness. It places the sun on our arms, revalorizing direct experience. Here we are. *Hic et nunc*. Comforted in the deep durée of time. The DNA of the redwoods around us matches fossils from 65 million years ago, an example of morphological stasis. Seemingly forever, their roots access moisture, their tops flourish in the blue sky. We can imagine mortality and disturbance are not on the table.

It’s lunchtime, but Ken Bates, horticulturist at the world crops garden, eats lightly because a heavy meal is uncomfortable when bending over garden beds all afternoon. The deer seen often now in the undeveloped back five acres is probably asleep. We learned about the deer in the same hour as Eric Schulz, horticulturist in the Mexico/Central America section, took us to the 1991 landslide site, where in the wintertime an elderly man had held forth to us about paradise and was drawn away by his partner when he asked her if they should now talk to us about sex. There was that time, and the time the man spoke of long ago, visiting this very place when the trees were young, planted densely after the slide, and there is also the time of telling this to Eric,

who later thinned the trees. Eric says he might have met the man one time, and a few minutes later tells us he had thought he might work this section of garden forever, but his body is wearing down. Time is a crumpled handkerchief—Michel Serres.

Our time here, as poets, has been a form of “untime”—marginally related to the prevailing measure of productivity and profit in the Bay Area and mirroring the gardeners’ “decelerated pulse of daily accomplishment” (Emily Apter), as they sweep the paths again and again. As I write this, on July 27, 2016, two months before the project ends, time feels foreshortened. My mother is slipping into dementia, Denise’s mother has cancer. One of our collaborators, Chris Carmichael, associate director of collections, is retiring before he expected to. The future is arriving. Outside the garden, we have been witnessing and protesting social injustice. These are our times. Climate change is occurring. Fascism is on the rise.