

This Garden of Ours is an ACE Grants project, exploring the positive effects of nature and diversity within it as well as critiquing the key role of botany in the construction of global power dynamics and the lasting effects this has on migration and attitudes towards it. The initial project consisted of a 6-month research and workshop schedule, 25+ artists and an ongoing public-facing programme of exhibitions and events including an installation, a panel discussion and more. By collectively evoking the garden of eden through research, art and aesthetics, we subvert the hostile environment narrative to provide an inclusive and planetary challenge to it. We collaborate regularly with Journey's Festival International, Lets Keep Growing Levenshulme, The People's History Museum. We now run public workshops, talks and consultations. Please email [contact@elmalart.com](mailto:contact@elmalart.com) with This Garden in the subject heading for collaboration opportunities.

### **This Garden of Ours Panel Discussion; The Intersections of Botany, Art and Migration**

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*This is an edited transcript of the panel discussion at This Garden of Ours exhibition launch at Manchester Museum on Thursday 10th October 2019. As featured in ROOT-Ed Issue 10.*

#### **[Dr Dani Abulhawa]**

our first question from the welcome task is for everyone in the room  
'Tell us about a place, anywhere in the world, that makes you feel at peace and connected to yourself and the landscape around you. What does it look like, feel like and smell like. Draw or write your answer on the back of the card.'

Now I want you to swap cards with a stranger... has everybody done that? Right, now I'd like to ask the panel to read out the cards they've received

[panel reads out/describes drawings on their cards]

#### **[Dr Dani Abulhawa]**

This one is for Jessica, I was wondering if you could tell us about 'This Garden of Ours' and what you wanted to explore with the project?

#### **[Jessica El Mal]**

The idea from the project came from, well actually the answers here demonstrate where the idea came from.. so many people have described nature as key to a place where they feel safe and free, that's what really started the project... it started with the idea of the Garden of Eden, as this idyllic haven and questioning whether that had to be imaginary. We began the project doing workshops using different art techniques in different natural setting across the north-west, using textures and colours pictures and plants which we then put together in an installation to evoke a feeling... a feeling of this Eden.

#### **[Dr Dani Abulhawa]**

Ivy, can you talk a little about the idea of collective memory and how multiple personal and collective histories have come together in your work as an artist?

**[Ivy Kalungi]**

I was always interested in peoples stories, whether that be asylum seekers or migrants ... I've always been inspired by them. So I wanted to do something with their stories... their stories and my stories... where I'm from. With FACT I wanted to create a safe space for women to speak and share stories, so I did that over a two-week project. We also looked at questions of how we make a connection between past and present, how stories live on in archive, as a way of collective memory.

**[Dr Dani Abulhawa]**

That idea of working in collaboration and making collective memories together is really important, and I really like the link between the past and present.

Beccy, could you tell us about some of the ways artists you have worked with explore their experience of being connected and disconnected to the places they call home through nature?

**[Dr Beccy Kenedy]**

I've written about artists who are working in Britain but they may have lived in another place in their lifetime or different generations may have migrated here, and people will look at place in relation to memory not just personal memory but cultural memory and memory passed down through generations. For example, if you have grandparents from Ghana you may have tasted Ghanaian food but may never have been their yourself. Memory and place and landscape are often woven into their artwork, often juxtaposed with Britishness (if they are working in the UK). Sonya Boyce, for example, looks at her heritage as a black British person and uses natural symbolism to explore this... within her painting she has elements like a rose, for example, a black English rose. So sometimes plants, in art projects, can be big indicators of heritage, memory and journeys. Another example is tea, this has been used by many artists to demonstrate colonial migration of plants and plant matter. Tea was exploited and is now a 'typical English drink' which is actually from India.

**[Dr Dani Abulhawa]**

Can I ask Jessica, has any of these issues of plant matter come up in This Garden of Ours Project?

**[Jessica El Mal]**

Yeah, so one of the main inspirations for the project is the ethical implications of a botanical gardens. So you see these beautiful buildings with an array of plants from around the world, presented for our entertainment right? But these plants were brought over during colonial rule, for their beauty or health benefits or just for scientific curiosity, and they really present a legacy of Western exploitation and domination over knowledge production. Then juxtaposing the botanical garden set up, there's also a trend in science to disregard plants that migrated here incidentally, as non-native or invasive. There's lots of links between the migration of plants and ultimately, what now forces the migration of people (whether that be global unbalanced distribution of wealth, unstable politics or, increasingly, global warming).

**[Dr Dani Abulhawa]**

This is a question for Fauziya, from your work on Root-ed Zine and personally, can you talk about the importance of being 'rooted': to know and be free to express your roots, identity and heritage?

**[Fauziya Root-ed]**

I feel like it's important to know who you are and what you connect to. As a media source, it's important not to censor BAME voices. You look at most media and they have an agenda, and it's important for us to let people have their voice, not push an agenda and help create a place where they can feel Root-ed.

**[Jessica El Mal]**

I'm going to welcome Zahida to the stage, one of the This Garden of Ours artists who is going to give the panel's closing statement...

**[Zahida]**

Can you hear me? I would say when we think about our life and what is important... health? Where does this come from? Health is absence of disease, and we have physical health and mental health. We are part of nature. Many of, something is missing. Somewhere care is missing. Somewhere totally humanity is missing. Many places feeling is missing - makes people heartless. We should offer humanity freely. I don't know whether it is only my feeling, but I have met many people and I can see even very rich people are crying. Because care, friendship, humanity makes the colors of our gardens.

**We are all flowers of gardens.  
Different colors  
different textures  
but all living together,  
learning to look after one another.  
This is nature.**

**This is my message of tonight.**  
Thank you very much.

[crowd applause]