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Alberta Whittle: We gather and dream of new congregations

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Cover image:

Alberta Whittle: We gather and dream of new congregations

by Anneka French • 12.10.2022

The overriding concerns of Alberta Whittle (b.1980) – how care, community and growth resist experiences of anti-Blackness – are manifest in multiple configurations in *Congregation (creating dangerously)*. This long-term project by the Barbadian-Scottish artist has been developed with Grand Union, a gallery and artist studio facility in Digbeth, Birmingham, and comprises a series of conversations, a small garden, canal-side bothy and the gallery exhibition *We gather and dream of new congregations* FIG.1.

The exhibition opens with a 35-minute film, a projection framed by sculptural screens with triumphant, curvaceous edges. The multi-layered film, also titled *Congregation (creating dangerously)*, is a combination of archival footage and new material that includes performances by a singer FIG.2, a dance artist and interviews with Birmingham residents who reflect upon experiences of racism, resistance and hope. It spotlights the Jamaican-born activist Eunice McGhie-Belgrave and her friend and colleague Sonia Hyman, alongside three young brothers who tend allotments and gardens as part of McGhie-Belgrave's and Hyman's project Shades of Black, a community initiative born out of Birmingham's notorious Handsworth riots of the 1980s.¹ These are woven with interior scenes of Birmingham Cathedral, urban demolition, roses and canals.² The footage engages with nature's methodologies for sociopolitical change, sentiments that are powerfully narrated by Whittle in the film's audio track: 'I lay my heart open and listen out for messages from the soil and from beneath the water' FIG.3. Whittle's voice foregrounds her journey of migration from Barbados to Birmingham as a teenager before later moving to Glasgow to study art.³ Personal stories and wider, public narratives of Birmingham's industrial past are set to a soundtrack of bells, thunder and guitars. The effect is sobering and uplifting, sensitive and unflinching, all qualities characteristic of an outlook and artistic practice that centres anti-racism and anti-colonialism.

Opposite, on a wall-mounted monitor, is *Making family through listening to the land* FIG.4, a longer, more intimate film, with viewing seats positioned nearer together to invite congregation and closer looking. The film is divided into chapters dedicated to McGhie-Belgrave, featuring interviews with her and the people whose lives have been impacted by her education, probation and mental health work. When asked by the interviewer what life was like when she first moved to Birmingham, McGhie-Belgrave's hesitation is

loaded. 'Racism was rife' she answers but remains adamant that positive action comes through gentleness. Indeed, her life's work and her published books offer methods to counter the continued erasure of Black lives and others deemed unworthy or disposable through collective care and growth.⁴ Whittle's film is a tender portrait of its subject, almost a love letter, a feeling further evoked by the addition of screen-printed cushions and embroidered blankets featuring punctuation and genealogical symbolism, which welcome audiences who wish to rest, talk and to learn. Combined with a cabinet of glassware borrowed from McGhie-Belgrave, Whittle's project strikes an elegiac note. The artist's favoured leitmotif of the shell, which she scatters throughout the exhibition, is also evocative of death and temporality, as well as aptly referencing migration, trade and value.

Outside the gallery on the canal towpath, *The Minerva Apothecary Garden* FIG.5, launched in May 2022, physically activates the themes of the exhibition. It is the result of both Whittle's and Grand Union's year-long work with a group of vulnerable women in Birmingham and the artist-gardener Carolyn Morton, who met weekly to talk and work together, and who have planted the container garden with healing herbs in an apothecary. On site, too, is the brightly coloured *Bothy* FIG.6, a small wooden structure with a select library, gardening tools and simple furniture FIG.7, which acts as a shelter and meeting place for these women but can also be accessed by the public by appointment. Though modest in scale, *Bothy* is expansive in possibility, with both it and the garden providing sanctuary and opportunity to grow relationships, skills and confidence, as well as medicinal teas and other remedies. These sculptural-architectural interventions are planned as permanent works that reclaim space and offer tangible ways to practice cohesion, care and community building.

Context is crucial. Whittle's work is here set against the backdrop of Grand Union's *The Growing Project*, an ambitious programme founded in 2019, working with people who are homeless, vulnerably housed and experiencing crisis, which aims to increase access to green space through the planting of neighbourhood gardens.⁵ The gallery is also producing an *Art and Ecology Podcast* that aims to highlight environmental issues at a time of significant local regeneration, particularly in relation to post-industrial Digbeth.⁶ Digbeth is a short walk from the city centre and home to many of Birmingham's artist-led galleries and studios, all of which are presently experiencing the impacts of HS2, the controversial high-speed rail development, in which sky-rocketing land prices are directly causing the demolition of buildings, infrastructure and communities in the city and other parts of the country. Grand Union plans to bring together its gallery and collaborative programmes into closer relation in the future and Whittle's project is the first that attempts to do this in earnest.⁷ This embedding is not only part of the gallery's planned holistic

approach but also a sensible strategic manoeuvre designed to strengthen the gallery's position as a core part of conversations with communities, housing groups and developers operating in Digbeth.⁸

A further significant local context is the Birmingham 2022 Festival, a large-scale cultural programme coinciding with the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games (28th July–8th August 2022). With a focus on the socio-cultural context of the Commonwealth, the Festival is currently completing a six-month period of activity in the city that has funded two hundred projects. Although much of this work aims to celebrate cultural production involving both local artists and those from Commonwealth countries, Barbados being one of them, there is no doubt that many of its projects have sought to incisively question and critique the history, value and traumatic legacy of the Commonwealth.⁹ Whittle's project, one of those commissioned and funded by the Festival, is certainly one of these, interrogating the industrial history of Birmingham as a city that has built a large proportion of its wealth – and by no means the only city to do so – upon the backs of individuals murdered and brutally exploited by the transatlantic slave trade.¹⁰ Much necessary colonial criticism has been left to culture rather than sport but now that the colour, spectacle, competition and international television coverage of the Commonwealth Games has concluded, the question that Whittle's work asks is: what comes next? The answers to this are in many ways speculative but nevertheless include an accompanying events programme with a harvest dinner and a wide variety of workshops and discussions with artists, scientists, writers and thinkers that will unfold throughout the remainder of this exhibition's duration. The answers also include Grand Union's ongoing work in Digbeth and in other areas of Birmingham; the work of Belgrave-McGhie and Hyman; the acts of gathering, dreaming, congregating; and the plants that will continue to grow in the city, pushing through soil and concrete alike.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Alberta Whittle: We gather and dream of a new congregation* at Grand Union Gallery, Birmingham, 2022. (Photograph Patrick Dandy).



Fig. 2 Still from *Congregation (creating dangerously)*, by Alberta Whittle. 2022. Single-channel video, duration 35 minutes. (Courtesy the artist).

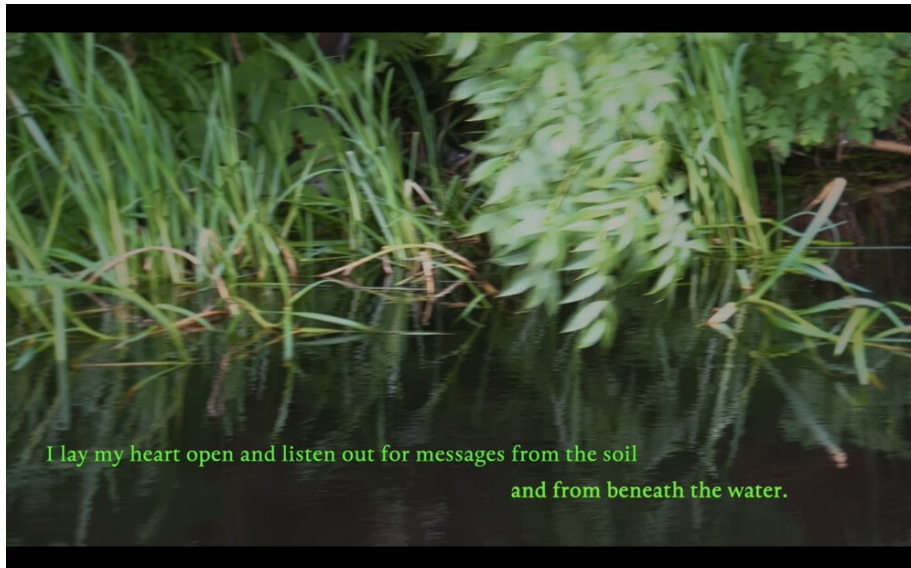


Fig. 3 Still from *Congregation (creating dangerously)*, by Alberta Whittle. 2022. Single-channel video, duration 35 minutes. (Courtesy the artist).



Fig. 4 Still from *Making family through listening to the land*, by Alberta Whittle. 2022. Single-channel video, duration 47 minutes 49 seconds. (Courtesy the artist).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Alberta Whittle: We gather and dream of a new congregation* at Grand Union Gallery, Birmingham, 2022. (Photograph Patrick Dandy).



Fig. 6 *Bothy: Congregation (creating dangerously remix)*, by Alberta Whittle. 2022. Exterior painted treated pine, corrugated steel, interior engineered pine and pine veneer. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Patrick Dandy; exh. Grand Union, Birmingham).



Fig. 7 Detail from *Bothy: Congregation (creating dangerously remix)*, by Alberta Whittle. 2022. Exterior painted treated pine, corrugated steel, interior engineered pine and pine veneer. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Patrick Dandy; exh. Grand Union, Birmingham).

Exhibition details

Alberta Whittle: We gather and dream of new congregations

Grand Union Gallery, Birmingham

2nd September–10th December 2022

Footnotes

- 1** See K. Connell: *Black Handsworth: Race in 1980s Britain*, Berkeley 2019.
- 2** Whittle's film was initially launched at an event at Birmingham Cathedral on 1st August 2022. The date marks the legal anniversary of the partial abolition of slavery in the British Empire.
- 3** See A. McNay: 'Alberta Whittle - interview: "No one can find Barbados on a map, whereas everyone can find the UK. That level of inattention galvanises so much of my work"', *Studio International* (5th September 2020), available at www.studiointernational.com/index.php/alberta-whittle-interview-no-one-can-find-barbados-on-the-map-that-level-of-inattention-galvanises-so-much-of-my-work, accessed 7th October 2022.

- 4** A launch for McGhie-Belgrave's new autobiography *Learning and Growing: A Lifetime of Service by God's Grace* is planned as part of the wider public programme during the exhibition's run. The programme includes workshops from additional artists, a weekend of activity looking at abolition and prison service in the United Kingdom, and a new *Grand Union Art and Ecology Podcast* episode with contributions from indigenous poets, activists and thinkers.
- 5** Six gardens have been developed so far. See 'The growing project', Grand Union, available at grand-union.org.uk/projects/the-growing-project, accessed 7th October 2022.
- 6** See 'Art & ecology podcast', Grand Union, available at grand-union.org.uk/projects/art-ecology-podcast, accessed 7th October 2022.
- 7** As noted by the Programme Director and Associate Curator at Grand Union, Alice O'Rourke, in conversation with the present author.
- 8** Grand Union are presently leading the £3.25m renovation of the nearby Grade II listed building Junction Works, planning not only to relocate from the precarity of the unlisted Minerva Works complex where they are currently based, but also to develop Junction Works as a new creative hub in Digbeth. See 'Junction works', Grand Union, available at grand-union.org.uk/projects/junction-works, accessed 7th October 2022.
- 9** Barbados became a republic in November 2021 when it removed Queen Elizabeth II as head of state while remaining within the Commonwealth and thereby eligible to compete in the Commonwealth Games. See D. Relph: 'Barbados becomes a republic and parts ways with the Queen', *BBC News* (30th November 2021), available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-59470843, accessed 7th October 2022.
- 10** The temporary sculptural intervention *Foreign Exchange* by the Guyana-born artist Hew Locke initiated by the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, was another of the Festival's highlights and saw a bronze monument to Queen Victoria transformed into a ship containing replicas of herself replete with armoured sculptural headwear and shipping crate (14th June–15th August 2022). See 'Hew Locke: Foreign Exchange', Ikon Gallery, available at www.ikon-gallery.org/exhibition/foreign-exchange, accessed 7th October 2022.

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