

ALAA ABU ASAD — THE DOG CHASED ITS TAIL TO BITE IT OFF

What was the starting point of your research project?

My interest in plants started back in Palestine before I moved to study and live in the Netherlands. In a previous project, titled *Wild Plants of Palestine* (2018) I documented observational tours solicited by the Palestinian Museum and conducted by two professors from Birzeit University to collect photos and information about endemic flora. I ended up addressing the role of photography and image-making as a practice and tool of both distributing and restricting information at once. I also questioned the territorial extension of what is meant by the term "Palestinian," while standing on insignificant topographical features of the (postcolonial) landscape in the West Bank.

In the Netherlands, I have been interested in the physical movements that plants make around the globe, whether naturally, relying on human activities, or as a result of human intervention. On a visit to Nationaal Park Veluwezoom, Rheden a few years ago, I was introduced to the Japanese knotweed—*Fallopia japonica*—as an invasive exotic plant. Since then, I have been retracing the history of the plant in the kingdom and abroad.

What has been your approach for the fellowship research project and how does it relate to the role of research in your practice?

Struck by the hostile approach that the Japanese knotweed has been treated with and the offensive language used about it, I started to look at the violent, xenophobic speech used to describe the plant and its other parallel sister-plants. I realized that the language used on the plant and the language that is often used to describe human migrants was analogous—a language that reveals the current human condition. In the ongoing research with the Japanese knotweed plants *The Dog Chased Its Tail to Bite It Off* (2019-ongoing), my approach is to draw attention to this

language and to the ways we treat invasive and unwanted species. There is a lot to learn from these plants which we usually fight and wipe out. These plants can make us think about ourselves as individuals, neighborhood tenants, residents, members of societies, and citizens of nation-states. Invasive species can indicate what society we live in; what bonds we have with each other, with trees, and with other plants; how we conceive of their existence; to what purposes we use them; and why we would consider a plant or a tree unwanted. What are the motives behind this? Are they only economic or are they also cultural? It also makes us think about our approach to nature and Mother Earth in general, and to things which we consider different, strange, and not-belonging, in particular.

The optimistic speculation on possible kinship with the invasive species of the Japanese knotweed was at the core of your research. This speculation allowed you to investigate both the notions of invasiveness in our current, shared sociopolitical reality and to embrace the language that emerges between the artist and an other-than-human, "green" companion. How does your research inform your understanding of otherness and invasiveness in your practice and in the wider public sphere? How has this newfound companionship influenced the dynamics and methodologies in your practice?

My work with the Japanese knotweed has taught me to slow down, contemplate, take time, and resist when necessary. It also allowed me to speculate a possible future and companionship, rather than the ongoing futile war. The use of invasive species is inevitably metaphorical in some situations, especially when talking about the human condition in times of climatic and environmental degradation worldwide. I've seen how easy it is to "other" and demonize invasive species as a way to blame them for environmental

and economic problems, while the responsibility falls somewhere else. Despite the “damage” they can cause, they aren’t monsters as is often claimed. Invasive exotic species are plants like any other endemic plants: they can be good or bad. This understanding has influenced the way my work has unfolded, as it dealt with language—spoken and written, verbal and visual—as its core research material.

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