



AMERICAN PUBLIC GARDENS ASSOCIATION
2020 VIRTUAL CONFERENCE
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Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility (IDEA) Cafe

July 2, 2020

Hosted by the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) Committee with special guests Anna Brunner, Senior Equity and Justice Coordinator for the National Wildlife Federation and Abra Lee, 2020 Longwood Fellow.

The following questions were submitted by attendees to the virtual conference event and written responses are provided by special guest presenters Abra Lee and Anna Brunner. A video recording of the session is available to all Association members in the Library and Media Center.

This session was moderated by Mae Lin Plummer, 2020 Longwood Fellow. The Association would also like to thank Board Member, MaryLynn Mack, Chief Operating Officer, South Coast Botanic Garden and Maura Nelson, Education Specialist & Accessibility Coordinator, United States Botanic Garden.

QUESTION:

Now that racism is on white folks' radar, they are looking for "experts" to teach them about how to fix their problems. This is not the job of the Black community, so should they be figuring this out themselves? What if they make mistakes? White folks are so afraid of not being perfect.

Abra Lee:

Yes--there is no easy or comfortable way to talk about racism. We just have to start and get comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Anna Brunner:

Yes, perfectionism is a trait of White Supremacy Culture--as is either/or thinking. In this moment, I see a lot of fellow White folks thinking "if I don't act now, I'll be condemned forever!" And that instant gratification just isn't a part of solving the challenges of racism. So White folks in particular need to work to let that one go and as a White woman I can tell you—you're going to make mistakes. But here's the thing, by NOT trying or learning about how to be anti-racist, you're DEFINITELY going to hurt people unintentionally. So really, you may as well dig in and do the long and hard work to practice anti-racism, because the risk of messing up is 100% assured when you don't act. And you're correct, it isn't the job of the Black community to fix problems of racism that White folks and people in power perpetuate. If folks are looking for "experts" I have great news—there are plenty of people who have devoted their energy to do this anti-racism education work. Many are folks of color. You can find many of their books, articles, podcasts, and ideas in the resources page. Additionally, popular culture and social media are both tools that can be deployed to expand your perspective. For example, consider reading the fiction of Colson Whitehead, N.K. Jemisin, and Jesmyn Ward.

QUESTION:

So many of us want to have meaningful conversations about race, our personal experience, and help us all find our role in moving this forward. As a POC, I find it difficult to bring my voice to the table, although I'm getting better! As you all move through these conversations, what opportunities do you see for the other black and brown women to elevate our voices in the plant world right now?

Abra Lee:

I think there is an opportunity as a woman of color to reclaim your story. What I mean by that is there is a lot of sharing Black/Brown/Indigenous stories in public gardens right now. These are white spaces that many of which still have not publicly acknowledged systemic racism as a problem. It is not okay to share the "feel good" moments about a culture without these institutions acknowledging the long-term harm systemic racism has caused. It is appropriate to point this out. It is okay to be the expert in your respective part of public gardens and step in when someone is speaking on an experience they know nothing about. Also, know you are not crazy and not imagining things. We are not allowed to be our full selves in these spaces. It should not be on you as the POC to speak up. The burden is on your white colleagues to speak up as well and support you in meetings and publicly.

Anna Brunner:

As a White woman, I just want to lend my support to say hearing from folks of color is very important, and that this is a two-way street. To other White folks: We need to make space for people of color and listen to what they're saying. That can look like paying attention to who is speaking in a conversation and then saying "I'm hearing from a lot of the same people, does someone who hasn't spoken want to say something?" and then really being silent for some time to recognize that some folks may need more space to get their thoughts in order and to decide it is worth the risk to speak up. Also, if a person of color makes a point that you don't immediately understand or it doesn't resonate with you, do not dismiss it. Sit with it. Stretch yourself to consider the various ways the point is true and find pathways for it to resonate with you. Folks are speaking their truth and it is our job to collaborate to understand.

QUESTION:

Going beyond having conversations about institutionalized and systematic racism, what are some important anti-racist *actions* that gardens can take to support BIPOC and other underrepresented groups?

Abra Lee:

Gardens can and should ask their boards to publicly take an anti-racist stand. If they cannot why are they there. We also have to eliminate biased leadership, it is ineffective. Hire companies that have a track record of putting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in leadership positions, not just service and security positions.

Anna Brunner:

I am not a part of the Public Garden world, so there are likely details or ideas I'll completely miss. My broadest advice is to understand the current limitations and strength of the public garden model in reaching folks who have the least social group power--youth and elders, women, non-Christians, folks of color, trans folks, folks with disabilities, indigenous folks, folks with low-incomes, and others. And beyond assessing your current institutional practices, consider what growth would look like by meeting communities where they are. Who defines what a public garden looks like? What its purpose is? What is the role of Public Gardens in community agriculture, for example? The best actions actively shift power.

QUESTION:

Our staff is white, our members are white - but everyone believes we are not racist so don't have a problem. What can I do to make things more diverse?

Abra Lee:

Unfortunately, you are well aware there is no silver bullet to tackle the issue of diversity. Have an uncomfortable and honest conversation that systemic racism is at the center of everything in the United States. That is the birthmark and stain of this country that we cannot wash off. So just because someone doesn't think it is there--it is there and appears in many forms. Thinking an organization is beyond racism is racist in itself. If the organization was truly beyond racism, they could show every other company in America how to get there. So, this all means that even where you work, there is still much work to do. You can start by asking what are they willing to give up? Are they willing to give up their board seat or leadership position to help diversify the organization? If we are to support our gardens in this way, know that support comes with real sacrifice.

Anna Brunner:

I'd start by having conversations, so folks understand we do have a problem. There are not "accidentally" anti-racist projects or programs. The status quo in the United States is to return power to those who have it: white folks (and men, and straight folks, folks who currently do not have a disability, Christian, etc.). When we are not being actively anti-racist, we are upholding systems of oppression. I have found a useful strategy when working with fellow White folks is to be curious, ask questions, have them show you more about their thinking. With this additional information, there are often in-roads to having deeper conversations that complicate notions of fairness. And, step-by-step, these conversations can begin to show folks there is a problem. From there, the next step is what we each have agency to do about it.

QUESTION:

Our garden is in a rural area. The diversity of our members and visitors is improving each year. I would like to engage in conversations to determine how we can grow as a welcoming and safe space. I think that evolution should be led by our members who are POC but we don't ask about race in membership surveys and applications. how do I reach our members and engage them in these conversations? I tend to go straight to the point but I am being cautioned that this requires more finesse.

Abra Lee:

I agree. Go straight to the point and say: "Black/Brown/Indigenous/People of Color members, etc. we want to hear from you." What would you like to see? We cannot assume what the respective needs of these groups are. How can we know their needs if we don't ask them directly?

Anna Brunner:

As a White person, it is important that I work to center the voices and perspectives of people of color, so I commend you for recognizing the need to center folks of color. One pitfall to be careful to avoid is going too far and putting all of the work to dismantle White supremacy culture onto the backs of those who are most oppressed by it. One way to avoid this is to recognize that there are roles for everyone to play in dismantling racism and White supremacy culture. Therefore, I would lead by asking for folks who are interested in doing anti-racism work. In other words, look for the skills and competencies you need—don't only focus on group identity alone.

QUESTION:

White Fragility is a serious thing. We need to get over ourselves, put our big girl pants on and acknowledge our privilege. However, I think it is so important to invite people into a conversation that can be productive. How can we implement a "call in culture" rather than "call out"?

Abra Lee:

Humility goes far. Asking someone to your table for perspective isn't wrong. It also needs to be said that groups such as Black, Indigenous, POC are not a monolith. For example, calling in a Black woman to your table doesn't mean she speaks for the Black delegation because there are nuanced lived experiences in that community too. We have to be honest and that is uncomfortable too and say "hey, I understand if you tell us no, but we would love to ask." And you may get a no, but you may get a yes as well. Be clear you are asking them their wants and desires in a garden space, not calling them in to explain racism, etc.

Anna Brunner:

I am a big fan of call-in culture. The tools I use for this are one-on-one conversations, asking if folks would like feedback before giving it, and providing examples where I, myself, have made similar missteps and what actions I took to grow and change. Call

out culture is about making someone feel bad or shamed into acting better, so if we shift our thinking towards growth that can help tremendously. As a White woman, I also need to commit myself to being better at interrupting microaggressions when they happen and not staying silent to have those one-on-one conversations only. So practicing this will feel awkward and there's value in naming that. You can say "hey, you know, I just noticed something and I have some feedback to give that might be a bit awkward, and I'd like to give it anyways if that's okay with you."

QUESTION:

I'd like to bring up the topic of land acknowledgement. It seems like botanic gardens have a responsibility to consider that practice on a large scale. How should gardens begin looking at and taking action on this process?

Abra Lee:

Gardens have to be real about their history. Acknowledge first, everything built in the United States is built on stolen land. Full stop. This is not a debate. Second, try to trace what indigenous tribes may have been the original occupiers of the land and acknowledge them in a real way in the garden. Third, acknowledge the red-lining discrimination practices of land ownership and green, yellow, red or good, okay, bad neighborhoods and why public gardens were designated for areas that were labeled "green" or good and that areas particularly with Black, Indigenous, POC, and poor neighborhoods were red-lined and labeled bad. With have to reckon with these uncomfortable truths. It doesn't make them any less true.

Anna Brunner:

This is a great question and complex, as is much of justice and liberation work. The heart of the complexity is in how to ensure your land acknowledgement isn't just a platitude or a box that gets checked. Land acknowledgments are a part of a bigger project of atonement towards reconciliation and restitution. We are living on stolen land, and what do we plan to do about it? Can we keep living on this land and under what conditions? These are big and radical questions that go hand-in-hand with Land Acknowledgment. The good news is that you don't have to start at the end—you can begin by understanding the history of your botanic garden's place. Who used to live on this land? Where do they live now? In what ways do we honor or disrespect the knowledge and value of place? And as you learn about whose land you're on, subsequent steps can be taken towards repair—what about passes or memberships provided to Tribal community members? Recognition of the original names of the plants in your garden to help keep indigenous languages alive? Programming that is led by

local indigenous folks? Changing or removing parts of the garden as new understanding emerges?

QUESTION:

It's frustrating that any anti-bias training or anti-racist initiatives at my (and I assume most) garden(s) has to get passed through or down from our almost exclusively white (male) leadership. I feel, as an indigenous woman, really frustrated with this. Are their resources on upsetting those power dynamics to help those not designated as managers or directors equal footing, a seat at the table, and the ability to step up as a leader in this moment and movement?

Abra Lee:

That is infuriating, exhausting, and frustrating. I cannot imagine how you feel. We have to be willing to eliminate ineffective biased leadership. If at this garden White men cannot step up and make space for your voice to be heard, then their leadership is not only biased, it is ineffective. The environment should not be one in which you have to feel silenced. This is a big problem as it means we are not free to be ourselves in these spaces. Board members and leaders who cannot support bias training or take anti-racism stances or encourage amplifying voices that are marginalized are not leading. They are doing nothing from their position of power to fight systemic racism and should be called on it by their White colleagues. It is not the burden of you, the Indigenous woman in the room to do this. You do not and should not carry the fight of systemic racism on your back. It is their fight too, let them carry it, it is time for them to step up or move out of the way so someone else can step up.

Anna Brunner:

What you are sharing is indeed frustrating and exhausting. Disrupting and changing power structures is what this work is all about. And there's definitely a HUGE challenge to get folks who hold power (often White men) to commit to taking actions that lessen their perceived power. In my experience doing this work—given the caveat that I hold many dominant group identities—my advice would be around organizing to build power. Finding other folks who share your concerns, your vision, your desire for change, and working with them towards a plan. Collective action is stronger than one voice alone and can be used to shift power. If you can, find allies who are in positions of authority and collaborate with them. And I'll also add to my fellow White folks, show up to do this work. Do not demand to lead or control it. Recognize and continue to educate yourself on the power and privileges you hold so that you can navigate them to be anti-racist and work towards justice. Reflect on and recognize when you are power-hoarding and work

to understand that this trait isn't helping you. Be humble and commit to learn from your mistakes. We each have a role to play in achieving collective liberation, so please show up to do the work.

For additional information about The Association IDEA Committee and Resources, please see here:

<https://www.publicgardens.org/about-us/IDEA>