ChLA 2022 Conference: “City in a Forest”

“We pass under the shade of the magnolias and red oaks that sprout everywhere in Atlanta. Trees easily outnumber residents.”

–The Downstairs Girl (2019) by Stacey Lee

Atlanta holds any number of monikers—Hollywood of the South or the Cradle of the Civil Rights Movement, for example. Indeed, local residents also refer to Georgia’s state capital as the “City in the Forest.” And so, for ChLA 2022: Atlanta, the first in-person meeting of the Children’s Literature Association since 2019, we’d like to grapple with the questions, contradictions, and possibilities that arise in considering the concept of a “City in a Forest” within the context of young people’s literature and media.

Children’s literature scholars have long grappled with the ways in which young people have been associated with the natural world, whether that be to nostalgize an idyllic, pastoral past or to emphasize youth’s wild, untamed behavior. But children are also used in culture as markers of the future, which is often conflated with progress, industry, and metropolitan spaces.
As Rebekah Sheldon notes, “The child became legible not only as a record of the past but as the recipient of a specific biological inheritance freighted with consequences for the future.” The figure of the child, in other words, becomes a site of promise, possibility, and protection.

Critics have explored the implications of an ideological nexus between city and nature on many fronts, from perspectives of environmentalism to that of hybridity. As we ponder relationships between the city and the forest within and beyond children’s literature, we can also look to and learn much from Afropfuturism, Indigenous futurisms, and other frameworks that explore the ecosystems of individual and social identity.

We see this in Melissa Jenkins’s study of the flying motif in Black picture books. Jenkins identifies how characters make sense of the divides between country and city, past and future in the ways that they “map, mark, and delineate as part of pointed socioeconomic critiques, responding to the difficulties of urban life by expanding the accepted geographies of black experience and politicizing projects of urban ‘uplift.’” While in The Marrow Thieves by Cherie Dimaline (Georgian Bay Métis Council), the central characters travel through trees surrounding dystopian urban spaces, finding and creating renewal most profoundly amid a type of Indigenous “city in the forest” where they join like-minded resisters, explains Patrizia Zanella.

Such narratives exist within and around Atlanta, a city marked by contradiction, trauma, and prosperity. It wrestles with how to negotiate its past with its present, and continues to experiment with future paths that will both support a diverse metropolitan area and embrace its natural environs. For instance, Clarkston, a suburb of Atlanta, has the highest number of refugees per capita in the United States, and many local refugee organizations focus their efforts on creating community spaces that take advantage of Atlanta’s “forest”—community gardens, co-ops, and summer camps for children. But stories of the refugee experience also take into account the hardships of landscape, such as Linda Sue Park’s Long Walk to Water or Fabio Geda’s In the Sea there are Crocodiles. Nature can be a source of terror and solace in stories of refugees, and we encourage papers that explore this unique Atlanta population.

We invite proposals that examine, from any number of angles or interpretative lenses, this concept of “City in a Forest” within children’s and young adult literature, media, and culture. Papers might address:

- utopian and dystopian spaces
- trees as characters or central story locations
- nature and nostalgia
- literature or media about or set in Atlanta
- Atlanta as liminal space
- international and farmer markets within cities
- Afropfuturism
- migrant experiences in urban and rural settings
- steampunk
- food justice and accessibility
• reproductive futurity
• racial and queer ecologies
• Ideas of hybridity
• nature as an idyllic past or future
• fantasy as a space that explores/complicates nature
• garden and greenery landscapes in the city
• post-apocalyptic landscapes and cityscapes
• stories of the displaced or refugee populations
• posthumanism and ecopoetics
• relationship between urban and rural in Civil Rights Movement

Additionally, given the welcome response to the introduction of pedagogy posters at ChLA 2021, we invite proposals for these for ChLA 2022 as well. Pedagogy poster proposals may be submitted in addition to or instead of paper proposals. They should focus on specific approaches to teaching children’s/YA literature or media and provide take-away ideas for adoption/adaptation into the classroom.

Please note that papers previously accepted for Seattle 2020 may be presented in Atlanta or may be held over for Seattle 2023, which retains the same 2020 CFP.