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Making Kin with Trees: Three Educators and Children Entangled with Treescapes

Stephanie Jones
University of Georgia

Lindsey Lush
University of Georgia

Sarah Whitaker
The Athens Forest Kindergarten

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Making Kin with Trees: Three Educators and Children Entangled with Treescapes

Cover Page Footnote

There are many advocates and activists for trees, greenspace, forests, and children and families having abundant time outdoors in this small city. We even have a "tree that owns itself" in the city that has become quite famous. We are indebted to everyone who makes kin with the local treescapes in this city and to the indigenous people who cared for this land long before white settler colonialists violently displaced them from their homelands.

Making Kin with Trees: Three Educators and Children Entangled with Treescapes

Stephanie Jones, Lindsey Lush, and Sarah Whitaker

Trees might save us.
Suzanne Simard (2021, p. 6)

In her book, *Finding the Mother Tree*, Suzanne Simard entangles memoir, science, history, industry, forests, fungal systems, capitalism, and ecology. She is emphatic that the book is not a book about “saving trees” but rather “a book about how the trees might save us” (2021, p. 6). Simard argues that the wisdom of forests is vital for a thriving ecosystem, and thus vital for the thriving of human beings. She maintains that dominant ways of thinking in the natural sciences have harmed forests, that capitalist interests in forests are more destructive than previously believed, *and* that humans can learn a lot from the communal, networked, resource-sharing practices of the forest.

Simard also writes, beautifully, about her lifelong relational ways of being with specific treescapes, what we think Donna Haraway would call *kin-making* with forests. Simard believes it was in that embodied relational being with trees and listening to forests that she was able to embark on a revolutionary journey that would turn forestry research upside down.

Forests are alive. Trees, shrubs, and fungi communicate with one another. There are Mother Trees.

Mother Trees are hubs of decades and hundreds of years of experience and wisdom that send out warnings about invasive species, communicate the needs of trees and plants struggling to thrive, and share nutrients through fungal systems. They are part of a kinship network, anchored in a particular place, entangled with all other beings in that shared world, including scientists like Suzanne Simard, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015), and Robin Wall Kimmerer (2003, 2013), and hundreds of millions of humans who are always becoming-with their more-than-human world.

We use the phrase more-than-human to describe all life that thrives beyond the category of human and all of the other things that mesh with and give shape to life (ideas, language, things, systems, and structures). While the “life” of transient beings is always assumed to be “living,” these other things in the world also have vitality, movement, and power.

In this paper, we explore some of our kin-making with trees and offer glimpses into our connected intentions to support children’s kin-making with trees in Athens, Georgia, the small city in the Southeastern region of the United States where we live and work: Stephanie as a professor, Lindsey as a kindergarten teacher, and Sarah as the founding director of Athens Forest Kindergarten. The three of us were called to the trees under very different circumstances. Stephanie can’t remember a time when she wasn’t in relation with trees and forests, so it was important to her 25-year career as an educator and researcher to recognize and encourage children’s relations with trees. Lindsey’s childhood experiences of independence and adventure in the woods behind a friend’s home have been mirrored in her own daughter’s play in wooded backyards, but she has faced challenges incorporating trees into her 18 years of work as an educator. Sarah wanted her children to experience an early childhood education beyond the skills-and-test-driven public school, so she found her way to the Forest Kindergarten philosophy, a journey that has changed her.

What we all knew and know intuitively is that something magical happens when we are with trees—that

who we are, what we feel, and what we do—becomes different in our entanglement with forests.

Our breath. Our thought. Our movements. Our clarity. Our knowing. Our spirit. Our creativity.

This relational way of being in the world fundamentally shifts subjectivity and what seems and becomes possible. We want this connection and belonging to become possible for children and youth, too, to support the conditions for their own unpredictable shifts in subjectivity so they can make their way in this shared world that we call Athens and beyond.

Connecting through the broad idea of trees and treescapes opened up our conversations about place, our own practices of mindfulness and meditation, and our unrelenting belief and commitment to children having access to formal and informal education that is affirming and cultivates their ways of knowing and being with one another and with their other-than-human kin in the world. We know children are beautiful and brilliant, curious and inquisitive, intuitive and compassionate, perceptive and spiritual. We know that being with trees and in forests expands and enhances interior worlds and ways of being that are unpredictable, surprising, delightful, profound.

We don't always know how to articulate what emerges through these entanglements, but we do know that inter/intra-connected writing across different fields or disciplines has been helpful to us. Childhood geographies, feminist studies in the critical posthumanities, Reggio Emilia-inspired pedagogies, and writing about affect/energy/spirit/relationships are all very useful to our thinking and doing with children.

Childhood Geographies, for example, positions children as shaped by and always shaping their physical landscapes. Children (and all of us) are inherently entangled with the *places* we spend time with (Aitken, 2001; Jones et al., 2016; Katz, 2004; Kraftl, 2013; Kraftl et al., 2012; Lanouette & Headrick Taylor, 2022), and this is also apparent in the stories we present in this paper.

Feminist studies in what can be called *critical posthumanities* (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Haraway, 2016; Jones & Thiel, 2019; Jones & Woglom, 2017; Tsing, 2015) are also helpful to us. These scholars show, through intimate storytelling and sophisticated theorizing, how our understandings about the world, society, relationships, well-being, exploitation, inequalities, and justice can benefit from a *posthuman* perspective. This, simply put, is the idea that humans are not central in the world (in fact, we suffer and create suffering when we believe this to be true), but are rather a part of a *more-than-human* entanglement that includes humans but is so much more. Much like childhood geographies, this orientation to understanding human life is that we are always a part of a dynamic intermingling of material objects, other humans, non-human animals and plant life, language, ideas, systems (like capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism), affect (those visceral experiences in our bodies), architecture, roads, infrastructure, media, devices, and more. Posthumanism tells us that we are not “individual” humans, but rather that we are dynamically connected with all people, animals, and other earthly kin all the time. Therefore, when we shine the spotlight on a human—for example, to try to see something or understand something about that human—we are surely going to mess up. Rather, our gaze needs to decenter that human and see the complex entanglement of which they are a part.

Reggio Emilia-inspired, Indigenous, and feminist critical posthuman pedagogies (Cajete, 1994; Lenz Taguchi, 2009; Moss, 2014; Najoli & Epum, n.d.; Rinaldi, 2006; Taylor, 2013; Woglom & Jones, 2016) also inspire us. There have always been people who knew that humans were of the earth and with the earth rather than “over” or “on” the earth and earthly materiality. This orientation changes the way educators co-create places with children, and how they think about children's powerful exchanges and being with the non-human world.

Finally, we truly appreciate the writing that some educators are doing about affect, energy, relationships, and spirit (Berlant, 2011; Dutro, 2019; Jones & Spector, 2017; Jones et al., 2019; Massumi, 2015; Nelson, 2004; Hanh, 2010). How people feel matters, and we can be intentional about bringing a spirit of generosity, collectivism, wholeness, and connectedness into everything we do. Our relational ways of being with ourselves, other humans, material objects, ideas, language, land, and our non-human earthly kin will change us all.

In this paper, we each share a glimpse into our relational ways of being with trees and examples of how we engage children with treescapes and forests in three very different contexts:

1. A working-class and wage-poor neighborhood where most children are Black or first-generation immigrants from Mexico.
2. A kindergarten class within a racially and economically diverse public school that advocates for social justice but falls short of seeing the justice of children being outside with trees.
3. A Forest Kindergarten of racially diverse children from middle-class and upper-middle-class families that meets daily in a county park.

We want to illustrate that kin-making with trees produces connection, belonging, and hope and is, in fact, an essential part of enacting social, political, and ecological justice. We hope our paper will contribute to a heightened awareness of and focus on treescapes as a space for children's and teachers' well-being and help shape a path for the well-being of our more-than-human kin. Note that each of us writes in the first person when it is our story to tell and we use a collective "we" in other parts of the paper.

STEPHANIE: THE RICHES OF TREESCAPES IN WORKING-CLASS AND WAGE-POOR COMMUNITIES

I lived my childhood years in rural Ohio in a trailer park on a street called Goldfinch. Some people might have called the street a "dead end" because the black pavement ended there, but just beyond the pavement were acres and acres of forest. The children called it *the woods*.

We would tell our families we would be "in the woods," and often wondered if a friend we didn't find at home was already in the woods themselves. My brother and I spent many hours every day in the woods, as did our friends. We climbed trees, rode bikes up and down ravines, played tag, built forts, created art with branches and leaves, played in the mud, started small fires, laid down on the ground talking to friends, and wandered farther and farther from established trails to make our own.

People often assume that children in wage-poor families, and perhaps especially children living in trailers or mobile homes, experience deprivation in their lives. Most of the families in our trailer park were white or presumed to be white ("white trash" is a derogatory, classist insult still used about families in trailer parks). Middle-class and upper middle-class white folks' vision is often quite narrow when it comes to what constitutes a "good" childhood and that typically aligns with capitalist images of idealized childhoods filled with material things bought with money (Jones & Vagle, 2013). People may look at a trailer park and wrap the trailer park-living-child in dominant classist discourses that are used to define trailer park living: poverty, crime, apathy, violence, sadness (these associations are dangerous and fueled by capitalism and elitism, but we won't be unpacking them in this paper). But no one ever saw me—or us—wrapped in trees.

Outsiders who looked down upon the trailer park and teachers who rolled their eyes when our school bus

1 *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* by Nancy Isenberg (2016) is a powerful history of class distinctions among white folks that demonstrates white elitism and the dehumanization of poor white people in the US.

pulled into the parking lot interpreted us through their own starved imagination of life.

I not only played *in the woods*; *I was the woods*. Without the woods, trees, leaves, sunlight streaming through, rain soaking the ground, hills, rocks, creeks, climbing, racing, creating, running, collecting, crouching, falling ... without those, I would be a different person entirely.

I was entangled with the trees and the trees were entangled with me. That made me one of the richest children one might meet.² It is part of who I am, even as a grown woman who has worked as an educator for more than 25 years. That part of me felt very much *at home* in a southern neighborhood where I was founding director of a free, informal, arts-based center for children and youth. This center was called the Playhouse.

EXPLORING NEIGHBORHOOD WOODS AND TREESCAPES WITH WORKING-CLASS AND POOR CHILDREN

Alexandra and I stretched out on the grass to read *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000) on a sunny spring afternoon outside the no-fee, informal learning center called The Playhouse (see Jones, et al., 2016; Jones & Spector, 2017; Woglom & Jones, 2016). When we got to the part where Esperanza's Papí tells her that you can only hear the earth's heartbeat if you lie silently on the ground and really listen, Alexandra and I put the book down, closed our eyes, and listened as our bodies became one with the earth.

Alexandra noticed that she felt her own heartbeat differently, like it was syncing with the heartbeat of the earth, and I noticed my body didn't feel separate from the ground we were lying on, but like a part of the ground itself.

Esperanza was from Mexico and her Papí was teaching her how to connect with the land of her home in a deeply embodied and spiritual way and teaching her that she can do this wherever she is. Alexandra, also from Mexico, was experiencing oneness with the land.

Alexandra and I opened our eyes at the same time, smiled, and giggled at the trees looking down at us from high in the sky.

Trees provided a safe and cool canopy in the backyard of The Playhouse, a much-appreciated reprieve from the hot Georgia sun. Children's kin-making with trees was apparent if not articulated: They climbed trees, threw balls and fabric into trees, they ate lunch and snacks beneath the trees, and they sat in a circle of "chairs" made of cut tree trunks. A large tree that had fallen across a deep ravine linked one backyard to another backyard. The more agile children scurried across the tree-trunk-bridge without hesitation and others took it slower, sometimes backing up to the safety of the ground when they looked down and realized how far they would fall if they lost their balance.

Trees were ever-present in the lives of the children, and yet none of them had explored the woods that bordered the neighborhood until The Playhouse grown-ups (including me) encouraged small groups of them to begin checking them out.

The Playhouse woods was a place where old things that were no longer wanted were often disposed of: a mattress, an old appliance, a bag of toys. It was a place that was "over there" in a disconnected and even haunted and scary way. When we first began our short treks into the woods the children would shriek and grab onto a friend if they heard a noise, even if it was only a small limb snapping under the weight of a friend walking right next to them.

2 Byrd Baylor's exquisite picture book, *The Table Where Rich People Sit* (1994), illustrated by Peter Parnall, is a story about the wealth inherent in a family's relations with non-human species.



Figure 1. Trees were a constant presence in the children's play

Trees, around their homes and across the neighborhood yards, were barely acknowledged verbally but always linked with their daily lives.

The woods, out there on the outskirts of the neighborhood, where big clusters of trees created a darker, cooler place, were avoided. They were scary. Dumping grounds.

Haunted.

We hoped to cultivate a sense of belonging and connectedness with the woods while also acknowledging and honoring a devastating racist history in the United States that is entangled with the same landscapes. In the famous 1939 song, "Strange Fruit," written by a White Jewish man from New York City, Billie Holiday sings about "Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze; Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees." Abel Meerapol, the songwriter, was also a teacher and social activist, and he wrote the song in protest against the lynching of Black people in the South (Moore, 2021).

I am a White woman who has experienced my own dread in this violent world, always faced with questions and concerns about my safety when I am alone in the woods, where terrible things could happen to me, because I am a woman. In fact, while the three of us love being with trees, we don't want to romanticize being in the woods. We all face fear and panic at times, fueled by the real and imagined threat of violence because we are women living in a misogynistic world. And while we cannot know the embodied knowing of anti-Black racism, we understand the threat of violence against Black people fueled by a history of racism and terrorizing Black people with trees. The trees have witnessed so much, thus we move into and through the woods with children and grown-ups grounded in these violent knowings and we walk step by step to live in new ways in our bodies, minds, and spirits with trees. Honoring the different fears we all acquire through the generations and our personal lived experiences in this patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist, colonialist society is important if we are to begin moving differently to create relations that are safer and more just.

Over time and across dozens and hundreds of visits, the children from The Playhouse built relations with the woods on their own terms. Squatting down in a circle, noses pointing toward new sprouts, they would wonder out loud, "What is that? When did it get here? Do you see that?" Sometimes they brought along sketchbooks so they could sit and draw. Other times they ran through the leaves and jumped through low branches. Some children began bringing local field guides to identify leaves and learn the names of trees.

And all of us—*all of us*—found our way to a peaceful, familiar way of being with those woods that were once so distant and disconnected.

Children also spent a lot of time in the woods without the Playhouse grown-ups. They would sit and talk, bring new friends out to see their special place, play games, ride their bikes, and climb trees. They played with the discarded household items and created art inspired by our art-making with them in the woods. We also heard about the children starting small fires. After hearing this, we showed them how to dig out a safe pit that could prevent a fire from spreading, and how to put out a fire completely before leaving it. They practiced with us, surprised that grown-ups would show them such things, but we saw this as part of our ongoing response-ability to the children, the woods, and the neighborhood.



Figure 2. Art-making with leaves

Outsiders might continue to perceive their neighborhood through a deficit lens, but the children in this community were always vibrant, creative, industrious, and inspiring. And now, they had become wrapped in trees beyond their backyards. It was magical every time, and those of us who had the privilege of spending time with them witnessed a palpable change in their individual and collective ways of being with and in the world.

LINDSEY: TWO GENERATIONS OF BLOOMING CREATIVITY AND INDEPENDENCE IN WOODED BACKYARDS

Growing up in upper-middle class suburban areas surrounding a large city in the mid-1990s often meant some form of “wooded” backyard for me. I have memories of my best friend’s house, which backed onto an oak-hickory-poplar forest (while I could not then have named the makeup of the forests around my home, the Forest Service 5-Year Report from 2014 describes this as the common forest in the area). We would often escape beyond the manicured yard into the forest, thrilled by our independence and courage as we ventured deeper and out of sight of the house.

The place among the trees became our storyland. We were pioneers: building our home, foraging for food, and tending the cookstove. We were princesses: escaped from capture, battling dragons and beasts, climbing mountains, and braving rushing rivers. Most of our play centered on an enormous fallen tree and the discovery of a small hatchet in the basement. The tree became the wood for building imaginary fires, the bodies of defeated monsters, the ship, the castle, the mountaintop. Our imaginations had no limits, and our time in the woods made possible the stories we created.

Now as a parent in a more modest home but still within range of the woods, my escape into the trees is less of a rebellion. After all, there are some trees in our fenced backyard. Beyond the fence is a stretch of field cleared by a powerline and bordered by thick woods that run down to a creek crossing and a county park. It is a place of independence and creativity, this time for my young daughter, Amelia.

I came to appreciate her experience with the woods in 2020 when COVID-19 forced the closure of school buildings and sent us into lockdown. I worried about how the isolation would affect Amelia, an only child away from teachers and peers, bored, alone, and stuck in the house. Imagine my surprise when instead of gluing herself to a screen, she walked out the back door and disappeared into the trees.

Every day, she would explore, create, and imagine—all on her own. She built nature sculptures and created imaginary worlds and stories, and took along an audiobook that she would listen to outdoors. She'd return hours later, dirty, tired, hungry, happy, and overflowing with questions and retellings from the day's reading.

Amelia's time among the trees with a book developed her into a reader in a way that school had failed so far to do. Though she was deemed "on grade level" by school testing protocol,³ it wasn't until time and space opened up for her to read alone in the woods⁴ that she discovered, as I had many years before, the joy of story. A joy that stands firm today after returning to school in the traditional setting.

In my 18th year as an elementary public school teacher, I find myself butting up against the confines of scripts, scopes, and sequences oriented to increase test scores and "student achievement." This conflicts with my desire to find space for teaching and learning that is emergent, adventurous, and creative. Once again, I find myself seeking this in the woods.

3 This performance of reading and being a "good" reader is wrapped up in her subjectivities of class, gender, and race that construct perceptions and performances in institutional settings such as schools (Enriquez, 2014; Grumet, 1988; Jones and Woglom, 2017).

4 As Becker (2022) observed of her students' experience in an urban forest school setting following COVID-19 closures and reopenings, the generally accepted concept of children having "lost a year" of learning disregards the experience of learning and living through a time of navigating disruption and change, as well as embracing new interests and priorities. Even without in-school constructs of reading, for Amelia and, Becker argues, many other children, "Learning, as always, was in abundance" (p. 58).



Figure 3. A pathway into the outdoor classroom/nature trail behind the school

BREATHING WITH EMERGENT EARTHEN CURRICULUM

Our school is located just off a well-traveled two-lane road with a small gym, dry cleaner, drug store, gas station, a local breakfast favorite, The Biscuit Basket, and a collection of large, square cement buildings that have popped up in recent years. The school grounds are large enough for a soccer field and playground structure scattered with trees and a walkway around the back to the outdoor classroom/nature trail. A brick path leading up to a small wooden archway and fence mark the entrance, and the back boundary, some 20 yards away, is lined with tenacious bamboo and a chain link fence. Rocks demarcate a one-eighth mile long pathway, and students have bushwhacked other smaller, duck-and-scramble paths through the bamboo that they tend to prefer.

The space is usually referred to as the *outdoor classroom*, but I have never warmed to the term. Outdoor classroom evokes the idea of moving the same old scripts and tasks outside, but I want to explore how this small patch of woods can be an invitation to what Hooven and colleagues (2021) call an *emergent earthen curriculum*, learning that springs forth from shared experiences in the moment and deepens our understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings, human and non-human. While this paper is not the space for critiquing scripted lessons, oversight of curriculum scope and sequence, and the neoliberal mentalities of productivity and achievement that police our teaching and learning, the ubiquitous, invasive nature of the problem means that it touches on all things, including the small patch of woods behind our building.



Figure 4. The outdoor classroom/nature trail

My students and I visit this space daily. We don't carry books, slate boards, markers, or flagged teacher's editions out with us or sing letter chants and consonant, vowel, consonant (CVC) words to the sky instead of the ceiling. We venture out to connect with nature for wildly different reasons.

And this was where I came across my first struggle. Like many public schools, mine is tightly bound in neoliberal and capitalist ideas, such as *time on task* and *instructional minutes*, which dog my every decision and are closely surveilled. My decision to *spend time*⁵ was outside of the minute-to-minute schedule of instructional requirements and could be approved if I were to make it count by translating in-class teaching practices—curriculum, resources, scripts—onto the outdoor benches.

Our time outside, instead, is held sacred and stands alone in its value. But even as I take that stand, I struggle with the fear of discipline and failure. Our daily visits to the trail are done mainly in secret and partially in defiance of what I have been told I am *not* to do. And it brings to the surface that even as I try to create belonging in the classroom, I feel such little belonging in my school and profession in general.

As I spend more time with the students and the nature trail, I am more conscious of using my body in the space. When I find myself checking email, catching up on messages home, even snapping pictures of the kids to send to families, a whispering swish of the trees, a swirl of leaves caught in the wind, or a shimmer of sunlight filtering through the trees grabs my attention and reminds me to put my phone away. It tells me to breathe in and slowly back out, to take a quiet walk with the trees, where I am often joined by a small hand in my hand and someone wanting a chat or quiet time together.

Our relational ways of being with the nature trail always shift, ebbing and flowing and creating

5 "Spending time" is a neoliberal metaphor that conceptualizes time as a commodity that is, or *should* be, used to the highest productivity. It is important to critique this commonplace metaphor that imbeds and normalizes neoliberal ideologies in everyday language in schools (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000).

emergent possibilities (Becker, 2022; Hooven, et al., 2021), such as the time last winter when the temperature fell below freezing, and the students, led by Tori, discovered a collection of frozen, frosted leaves on the ground. Fascinated by the crystallization of the ice and stiffness of the leaves, they asked to bring it inside to take home. We placed it by the plant window where we collect our outdoor discoveries for sharing and observation.

An hour later, Tori discovered the crystals had disappeared and the leaf sat in a puddle of water. Shouting for her classmates to join her, several students ran to examine the change. Here was an emergent opportunity for water cycles, states of matter, and writing. An entanglement of leaf, ice, puddle, table, hands, and warmth. An in-the-moment curiosity and wondering. A mistake. A new understanding. An emergent earthen curriculum.



Figure 5. Children exploring on the edge of the pond along the nature trail

While I feel equipped to respond in emergent ways to many inside-classroom events, social topics, and emotional learning throughout the day, I often feel out of my element outside with my students. I don't know the names of the plants, struggle even to accurately identify poison ivy, and regularly confuse the dandelion, daffodil, and daisy.

But, like the children, I am thrilled by the outdoors—the wild, even in the heart of our small city. I love the rare interaction with a red-tailed hawk, gathering students to watch as it perches on a branch, or to notice a lizard shimmying up a tree trunk, or to collect frost from the grass on a chilly morning.

As I wade through policies, practices, and forces that further de-professionalize the work I love, I struggle to draw breath. So contained, controlled, and regulated am I as a teacher that I've begun to see our short daily visits to the nature trail not only as a sacred time for the children to connect with trees and all the more-than-human beings in their shared world, but also as my own chance to breathe. Breathing in the gift from the leaves is visualized with such beauty by forest ecologist Suzanne Simard (2021): "Their stomata—the tiny holes that draw in carbon dioxide to join with water to make sugar and pure oxygen—pumped fresh air for me to gulp" (p. 8). Outside the school walls, I breathe in the excitement, curiosities, and unscripted discoveries with my students.

SARAH: INTO THE TREES FOR PLACE-BASED EDUCATION WITHIN A COOPERATIVE, COMMUNITY STRUCTURE

In my early days of parenting, I could see how little the typical preschool environment facilitated awareness of children’s bodily selves and inner worlds. The project I would later undertake, opening a new kind of preschool, seemed at first to be only loosely connected with my professional background in education. Like countless parents throughout time, I was motivated by my child’s needs.

My child’s needs for movement and sensory stimulation were not easily accommodated in the typical US classroom but, as I went looking for alternatives, the forest kindergarten approach I read about brought to mind the full body ease I had felt in my relatively narrow outdoor experiences. Those yearly camping trips, seasonal hiking excursions, bike rides down a favorite shady boulevard, and a childhood spent climbing “my” tree to sneak off with a book, were all brought to mind unexpectedly, as I faced the question of how to teach a child to *be* in their body. The pedagogy of the new American schools I read about, inspired by German and Scandinavian *waldkindergartens*, offered a framework that could make space for children’s embodied ways of being.

I went on to gather a founding Board of Directors who agreed to apply a critical lens to what is called a placed-based education, and which shaped so many American forest schools. We placed an emphasis on public land, community connections, and intentional caregiver education to build a multi-faceted organization, Athens Forest Kindergarten.

As a cooperative, parents participate in our community work or daily operations as a part of their child’s tuition. We build on parents’ good intentions for their children and through their own embodied experience in the treescape, and ask them to assist in our preschool for 40 hours a year. This time with children and the forest creates new possibilities for parents to know one of our core beliefs: the forest is not a place to visit, but a home they had forgotten.

Being thrown into teaching in a setting I had never planned on, I discovered how different the North Georgia forest was from that of my youth in Central Kentucky. That awakening seemed to spiral quickly into deeper and more complex connections. As I had read in my study of forest schools, returning to the same spot in nature every day would never get boring because my capacity for noticing would expand on every visit.

My body learned how the trail felt below my feet, the sounds of different kinds of wind during different kinds of weather, and I marveled with the children about the many stages of decay and growth happening during all seasons of the year.

DEEPENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH TREESCAPES AND CO-REGULATION WITH A CONFIDENT FOREST EDUCATOR

In order to facilitate children’s kin-making with/in the forest and beyond, we ask educators and parents to become attuned to their own relationship with the more-than-human world. Young children rely on caregivers for what we call *co-regulation* (Silkenbeumer et al., 2016), and in facilitating children’s interactions in and with the forest, a caregiver’s response lays the groundwork for the child’s future relationship with nature itself. Take, for example, the scenario of a small child lugging around a large branch with dozens of small branches and twigs jutting out at every angle: “Oh, I see you have a big branch there!”

The child doesn’t notice the remark and turns, almost tripping a group of students playing nearby so the educator approaches and softly puts her hand on the child’s hand: “You are so strong to carry that big branch!”

The child's eyes light up. "Yes! It's my tree! It's new since the storm last night!"

"The branches are big and getting close to the others! Would you like to keep carrying it in a place where others will be safe, or would you like to put it down on the side of our play area and go back to join the game?"

"I want to carry it!"

"Okay, come over here with me to this open area and I'll watch to make sure no one comes over and gets hurt!"

In this scenario, the educator witnessed a child exploring the forest in a free and joyful way but one that might create danger for others. The skilled way they helped the child move to safety without fear or shame is one of thousands of moments of confident co-regulation this child will experience during her year with us.

That feeling of being seen, over and over, builds a secure attachment where she knows she can explore away from the educator as her secure base and return to them as a safe haven. This model of attachment, as taught in the Circle of Security Classroom model (Cooper, Hoffman, & Powell, 2017), is what we draw on throughout the year for professional development and reflection. A child with a secure relationship with their teacher knows them as someone who can "[a]lways be strong, kind, and committed. Whenever possible, follow the child's need. Whenever necessary, take charge" (Marvin et al., 2002).



Figure 6. Children making playscapes and play in the forest

Though these are attachment needs in any setting, the capacity of an adult who is confident and at home with the local treescape, combined with the complexity of the forest environment itself, intra-act and make apparent the Reggio Emilia concept of environment as the "third teacher" (Malaguzzi, 1987).

MAKING SENSE OF KIN-MAKING WITH FORESTS AND ALL CHILDREN IN THE CITY

Although all humans may be born with a natural attunement to nature, for many of us it is stunted by the demands of modern life, and perhaps most tragically, this happens very early in life in institutionalized school settings. We aim to build the capacity of people in our small Southern city to make kin with the forest through community. This emerges in unexpected, magical ways within the community of children and families most intimately involved with the forest every day, but it also reaches outwards and through the broader community of Athens.

One example is my advocacy for the local public schools—where the children Stephanie worked with in their neighborhood attend school and where Lindsey works as a teacher—to extend and value play and outside time for all children. The children helped me prepare for a talk I gave at the local school board when I asked them what they wanted to share about recess and outside time for children “with the adults in charge of these decisions.”

As we sat in the forest with which we were so familiar, so connected with—indeed, our kin—their excitement bubbled up. They said they like playing in the mud and rolling around, playing in puddles, whistling, looking for sticks, and seeing all there is to see. The children told me some of the things they believe they learn from being outside. Like discovering how slippery things get when you climb, learning about boundaries (they gestured to the trees at the edge of the meadow that mark their play area), figuring out how to balance, how to be careful, and how leaves change colors and fall.



Figure 7. A child playing with tree limbs, branches, and trees to create, explore, and have fun

By questioning the established order of school when we developed the program, we have made way for a generation of students to be at home in their community with treescapes and at home with the very act of questioning the established order itself.

MIGHT TREES SAVE US?

If I am kin with the human and more-than-human beings of the Monterey Bay area, then I have accountabilities and obligations and pleasures that are different than if I cared about another place. Nobody can be kin to everything, but our kin networks can be full of attachment sites. I feel like the need for the care across generations is urgent, and it cannot be just a humanist affair.

(Donna Haraway, in an interview with Steve Paulson, 2019)

Trees might not save us in a dramatic end-of-fairytale kind of way, but we believe that being in relation with particular, local treescapes, nature trails, woods, and forests makes everything different. Being full-bodied and present in an entanglement of children, the wind, a flicker of sunlight, a bubbling stream, a discarded nightstand, chipmunks scurrying, a birdsong—is, well, *magical*. That particular

entanglement in a particular place, as Haraway argues, creates “accountabilities and obligations and pleasures” that are different from another set of kin networks and attachment sites.

This is one option a feminist critical post humanist shift can offer us: a way out of the apocalyptic trajectory that a human-centered, patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist, colonialist project provides. *Being with treescapes* (and all the more-than-human kin that are a part of a treescape) changes our bodies and ways of being in the world that just *feels better*: connected, grounded, at home, at peace, whole. With so many forces in the world telling humans that they don’t measure up, or they need to always do more and be more in order to have value, and that they ought to be competing to acquire higher status and more material goods, being with treescapes is not only helpful for humans’ well-being, but necessary for a future that is conducive to desirable conditions for human survival.

In her work on fostering ecological identities in children, Ann Pelo (2014) writes of the importance of engaging a sensual experience in our bodies, hearts, and minds in a specific place. She calls for a “conscious knowledge of place” to “underscore that intuited, sensual, experiential knowledge” that comes with living someplace (p. 43). We know this as making kin and cultivating networks of attachment sites. We want to be clear, though, that this is not about doing something today *because tomorrow depends on it*. Rather, our embodied presence today with our human and more-than-human kin is what allows us to breathe, to feel peace, to find clarity, to be in relation that feels good *now*. It gives us life as humans, as educators, and we see the vibrant life filling the children we spend time with.

Today is what matters. Trees help us know that.

To live well with each other in a thick present means environmental, multi-species, multiracial, multi-kinned reproductive and environmental justice. We can’t control whether this all works in the end—or even for tomorrow. Our job is to live in a thick time of caring for and with each other—much like Haraway’s making kin in this place, in this time. That’s neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but it involves cultivating the capacity to keep a kind of love, pleasure, accountability, and response-ability with each other in this place.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Stephanie Jones is a Josiah Meigs Distinguished Professor at the University of Georgia, where she teaches a wide range of classes in the College of Education and in women's studies, including courses on social class and capitalism, feminist theories and pedagogies, literacy pedagogies, teacher education, qualitative writing, inquiry and justice-oriented education, bodies and sexuality in K-16 education, and more. She frequently writes newspaper editorials for public audiences responding to current events that impact children, families, teachers, and K-12 education, and she writes regularly about nature, meditation, and healing on her personal substack. Stephanie loves to wander and wonder along trails in public parks where she lives and visits, and she is grateful to have many tree friends.



Lindsey Lush is an elementary school teacher and doctoral student in Educational Theory and Practice at the University of Georgia. In her research and practice, Lindsey explores feminisms, posthumanisms, play, emergent learning, social studies, and literacy. She serves on the board of directors for Athens Forest Kindergarten, an educational nonprofit dedicated to promoting nature, play, and reflective caregiving in early childhood. She loves learning every day in community with wonderful educators like Sarah and Stephanie.



Sarah Whitaker has devoted her career to promoting reflective and holistic practices in education. She is the founder and director emerita of the nonprofit Athens Forest Kindergarten and has also worked as a part-time professor teaching undergraduate and graduate classes. In her work as a consultant, Sarah offers professional development to help educators incorporate reflective and holistic ways of being into their teaching practice at all levels from early childhood through higher education. Sarah has a doctoral degree in Educational Psychology and is a Circle of Security classroom coach, a teacher of mindful movement, and is passionate about building community.