Arts & Humanities

The Tree Huggers of Columbia

Scholars and artists meditate on the arboreal at the “Being Treely” talk at the Lenfest Center for the Arts.

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The Dream of the Wood, by student Becky Moon, inspired by readings from English professor Patricia Dailey’s seminar Trees.

It would hardly be going out on a limb to say that the recent “Being Treely” talk, held at the Lenfest Center for the Arts, was the most tree-centric event involving Columbians since Joyce Kilmer 1908CC published his poem “Trees” in 1913 (“I think that I shall never see / a poem lovely as a tree”). At Lenfest, five Columbia thinkers gathered to look at trees through literature, art, science, history, and anthropology, and each made a case for the power of the flowering, bark-encased

life forms that philosopher Michael Marder has called “vegetal beings.”

Patricia Dailey, associate professor of English and comparative literature, spoke first. Noting that trees are “silent witnesses to our histories,” she examined the Old English Christian poem “The Dream of the Rood,” told from the perspective of the former tree on which Christ was crucified — that is, the wooden cross, or rood.

Next, Rachel Grace Newman ’19GSAS, assistant professor of African American and African Diaspora Studies, reflected on the silk cotton tree, or duppy tree, with its wide buttress roots and pods of fluff and seeds. She explained that the tree, which in Jamaican folklore is considered a portal to the spirit world, was sacred both to Indigenous Caribbean communities and to enslaved Africans in Jamaica, where it became a site of worship — and, for that reason, the site of whippings and hangings. Newman took solace in the thought that some of these long-lived trees predate the colonial world and its painful dislocations. “I do not want to think in evanescent human lifetimes of decades,” she said. “I want to think through the time of forests, in a web of interconnected presence.”

Then there is the inside of the tree. Nicole Davi, a researcher at the Tree Ring Lab at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, described how the cells of tree rings reveal histories of weather, climate, fires, pestilence, earthquakes, volcanic events, and hurricanes. And visual artist Darylina Powderface, an MFA student from the Stoney Nakoda and Siksika Nations, in present-day Alberta and Montana, compared tree rings to a diagram of four concentric circles describing the social structure of many Native communities: elders at the center, then children, then women, then men on the outermost ring, protecting the whole. Trees, too, she said, “hold lineage and kinship.”

The moderator, Miya Masaoka, director of the Sound Art Program at the School of the Arts, has composed “music” for trees in frequencies inaudible to humans. She called trees our “soulmates” from whom we’ve grown apart. “Closeness to them requires becoming more like them,” she said. “Trees and plants are like people but vastly slowed down.” Relating to trees, listening to them, leads us into “a transcendent space where what we thought we knew is now uncertain.”

Each speaker struck at the root of how to be treely, tapping the mysteries of our coexistence with these towering plants. In its ode to the arboreal sublime, the evening called to mind Kilmer’s closing stanza: “Poems are made by fools like me, / But only God can make a tree.”

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