

A Reader's Digest compendium of pharmaceutical herbs known in Finland. Richly illustrated.

Turi, Johan. *Turi's Book of Lappland*, edited and translated into Danish by Emilie Demant Hatt; translated from the Danish by E. Gee Nash. Oosterhout, The Netherlands, 1966. Arguably one of the first works of creative literature by a Sámi describing Lapp work and Lapp life; frequently issued as an ethnographic text.

Valkeapää, Nils-Aslak. *Beaivi, áhčážan (The Sun, My Father)*. Guovdageaidnu, Norway, 1988.

———. *Giđa ijat éuovgadat (White Spring Nights)*, illustrated by the author. Oulu, Finland, 1974. Later collected with two other volumes in *Ruoktu váimmus*.

———. *Trekways of the Winds*. Translation of *Ruoktu váimmus* by Ralph Salisbury, Lars Nordström, and Harald Gaski. Guovdageaidnu, Norway, 1985. Distributed in North America by the University of Arizona Press. Lyrical, autobiographical poems, including Áillohaš's meditations on his work with the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. No pagination, but I have numbered pages sequentially in my study copy of the book.

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## *Interdisciplinary Teaching about the Adirondacks*

ERNEST H. WILLIAMS, PATRICK D. REYNOLDS,  
AND ONNO OERLEMANS

Few regions compare to the Adirondacks in terms of the wealth of material provided for study from many different perspectives. A logical place to start in a study of any region is its history, which for the Adirondacks may include tracing the influence of the early Iroquois through the arrival of the French and the Dutch, to the settlers who tried to wrest a living from the land, and eventually to the establishment of a state park with its complex issues of land ownership and management. An understanding of the Adirondacks is enriched by learning about the geological history of the mountains, the views of artists who illustrated their perceptions of the landscape and wildlife, the impressions of writers who told stories of the region, and issues about wilderness and its preservation. These and additional topics contribute to a very broad menu for study.

A recently introduced interdisciplinary course on the Adirondacks at Hamilton College, entitled *Forever Wild: The Cultural and Natural Histories of the Adirondack Park*, attempts to merge these different threads in the search for a fuller understanding of the region. We are three faculty members, with different disciplinary specialties, who have taught this

course several times each and who, along the way, have begun to discover solutions to the challenges of engaging students in interdisciplinary study. In this essay we present some of what we have learned in the process, with each of us focusing on what has struck us most strongly; we discuss ways of creating interdisciplinarity and provide examples of interdisciplinary connections, particularly through the use of literature.

Our course is team taught, emphasizes oral and written communication, and culminates in an integrative project with a public presentation. The course is part of a sophomore seminar program intended to give students some synthesis to their studies during the first two years of college. The program has spurred the development of a number of courses, like ours, that not only are new to the curriculum but also add subjects that would not find an obvious home within traditional, departmentally based curricular structures. We have used two histories as the backbone of our course—Paul Schneider's *The Adirondacks: A History of America's First Wilderness* and Philip G. Terrie's *Contested Terrain: A New History of Nature and People in the Adirondacks*—but many additional readings supplement these histories, on topics such as the formation of the mountains, the ecology of the Northern Forest, regional creative arts and literature, political controversies, the arrival of different ethnic groups, acid precipitation, and global warming. Because firsthand experience enhances an individual's interest in a region, we take students for a mid-winter snowshoe walk or for fall weekend trips to notable Adirondack locales, including a night at a great camp. In the first four years of offering this seminar, the instructors have included seven different faculty members representing four different departments (English, biology, chemistry, and government), teaching eighteen fully enrolled sections of approximately 220 students.

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### Interdisciplinarity in Teaching and Learning about the Adirondacks

ERNEST H. WILLIAMS

A significant curricular question for our course is where to place the boundary on investigation—what to include or exclude—because a single course can cover only so much ground. Our course emphasizes glaciation, forest succession, human settlement, resource industries, politi-

cal organization and conflict, painting, and literature. At times we have included material on Iroquois culture, ethnic history, folk music, government regulations, sociological descriptions, and acid rain. We strive for integration of all materials we use because of the intellectual engagement and enhanced understanding that such a synthesis provides.

An integrated approach to a large subject is not easy, of course. Surveying many topics in a short time is a challenge, illustrated by one student's comment on the difficulty of transitioning from a discussion of Emerson's transparent eyeball one day to the Grenville orogeny the next. That's an abrupt change, to be sure. And there are difficulties for instructors. In the initial class one year, a student asked why he should come to a biologist or a chemist to study Emerson. Our reply was that as faculty we can read Emerson along with the students and see how the reading informs our view of the Adirondacks, although we recognize that, for a deeper understanding of Emerson, he would have to go to a specialist in literature. The idea of intellectual exploration is primary in a course like this, and in addition to encouraging students along its path, the instructors must model the same approach: reading, thinking, discussing, and drawing on one's own and each other's experiences. Another limitation to such a wide-reaching course is that each instructor is naturally more comfortable with certain topics than with others, but we have refrained from the tendency to retreat into our specialties and simply explain the material we know well.

We describe our course as both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, but these terms have different meanings. Multidisciplinarity implies studying a single subject from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Students in our course read and discuss works on numerous topics related to the Adirondacks, including geology, ecology, literature, art, history, philosophy, and public policy. Study of each of these components adds a layer of understanding of the region, but an individual could learn these separate layers by taking a series of courses in different disciplines. A deeper understanding is possible when the layers are added together. Interdisciplinarity, in contrast, requires integration of the different topics beyond simply studying them in succession; it is a bridging of disciplines. Integration may come about in any of three ways: use of the methodology of one discipline to study the material of a different discipline; improved understanding through study of a single topic from different perspectives; or a broadly enhanced understanding of the subject that, in the

end, is more than the sum of its parts. Multidisciplinarity, then, suggests a series of mini-courses, whereas interdisciplinarity requires integration. Because we find value in coherence, we attempt to turn what begins as a multidisciplinary course into a fully interdisciplinary one.

Rather than the two-part categorization of multi- and inter-disciplinarity, others have recognized several steps across a broader continuum. Lisa Lattuca describes four stages, which, when applied to teaching, range from a course within a discipline using methods from other disciplines to a course with no apparent disciplinary basis.<sup>1</sup> Her middle two stages match what I have identified above: a course that combines material from different disciplines (multidisciplinarity, or, in her typology, “synthetic interdisciplinarity”) and a course that integrates differing material and approaches (interdisciplinarity or “transdisciplinarity” in her terms).<sup>2</sup> The question is how to take ideas and material from different disciplines and blend them into a more integrated whole. Multidisciplinary courses may be team taught, which is an easily designed curricular structure, but weaving all the material into a single fabric of understanding remains a challenge. It is from looking at the details of interdisciplinary techniques that one finds what integration is possible.

The first approach to interdisciplinarity, using a method from one discipline to study another, is difficult. It is something we may do professionally. Because many scientific advances have emerged from interdisciplinary collaborations, numerous colleges and universities have expanded interdisciplinary programs such as biochemistry and neuroscience, and the methods of the contributing disciplines are merged in the interdisciplinary program’s courses. But how well can one use this approach in a single lower-level undergraduate course on the Adirondacks? The answer is not well at all. Whenever we get to methods, we use them within rather than across disciplines. The descriptions of three disciplinary methodologies illustrate what may be incorporated into an undergraduate course.

- a. Glaciation is one of the few topics in which we actually use disciplinary procedures. Rather than simply assert that the Adirondack Mountains were once glaciated, we can point to evidence that lingers on the landscape: moraines, glacial striations, drumlins, eskers, erratics, and kettle ponds. From this kind of evidence, one can construct a convincing argument that the mountains were once glaciated, and then map

the geographic reach of the ice sheets. This example illustrates the scientific methodology of using evidence and inference, but we apply it only to science topics.

- b. Historians start by asking a specific question and then searching for primary sources of evidence that help provide answers. The evidence must be understood in context, and historians may raise questions about what is or is not a fact. Histories are shaped by when they were written because the questions, which are culturally dependent, change over time. A historian is a detective who puts the facts together in a story, but this methodological approach is hard to pursue in an introductory course. As a result, we don’t do what historians do; we just read their stories.
- c. Art provides a third example. Art historians examine paintings both autonomously and contextually. Autonomous (compositional) consideration includes attention to the subject, design, techniques, use of color, style, brushwork, and overall quality. Contextual consideration includes what culture produced the painting, the ideas it represents, who commissioned it, and the audience that viewed it. It is hard to do much of the former when one has little experience evaluating artwork, but contextual evaluation is more accessible. Sophomores can, for example, evaluate the context that led to the difference in Adirondack painting from the early and late nineteenth century.

The above examples illustrate the opportunities and limitations of having students use the methods of different disciplines in a course with a subject as broad as the Adirondacks, and the examples also reveal how hard it is to use methods across disciplines. The first approach to interdisciplinarity does significantly contribute to our course.

In contrast, we achieve the second form of interdisciplinarity, in which the understanding of a single topic is enhanced by examining it from the perspective of more than one discipline. Two examples illustrate this merging of ideas. Understanding the climate and glacial history of the Adirondack region informs an understanding of the history of human attempts to farm the Adirondacks and why farming here has always been such a difficult struggle. The region is cold, with storm tracks racing across it,<sup>3</sup> and the glaciated landscape has left a thin cover of rocky soil. Another example of the merging of ideas comes from a consideration of Adirondack art painters such as Thomas Cole, Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait,

Winslow Homer, and Rockwell Kent. In addition to seeing different artistic styles, a viewer begins to understand how people perceived the Adirondack wilderness, from the “sublime” views of the early landscape painters to illustrations of the sporting life in pursuit of fish and game, seen in the paintings of Tait, to the effects of logging and resource harvesting apparent in some of the paintings of Homer. We are successful in achieving this second form of interdisciplinarity; students recognize and respond to the merging of perspectives to inform a single topic.

The third approach to interdisciplinarity is an extension of the second, in which the sum becomes more than its parts. Study of each topic, from art to ecology to social history, not only enhances one’s understanding of individual topics but also adds a more comprehensive understanding, layer by layer, of the region. Knowledge without a variety of perspectives is incomplete. What makes possible the full integration of different materials, the third approach to interdisciplinarity, is the consideration of place: the Adirondacks being understood as a distinct place. Mark Sagoff describes a place as a “cultural artifact,”<sup>4</sup> the merging of a part of nature with human activities and desires. In Alan Gussow’s phrasing, “A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings.”<sup>5</sup> Such expressions are clearly applicable to the Adirondacks, whose story is interwoven with the ways people have tried to extract a living from the region and with differences of opinion about the definition and value of wilderness. Our students begin with little knowledge of the Adirondacks, but their study of the region converts it to a place: a landscape with people and a history.

Consideration of a region as a place can be generalized: the same interdisciplinary approach can be used in studying other areas, pursued in other contexts, and taught in most any institution. A notable example of a region that lends itself to similar study is the Yellowstone ecosystem, with its human history of trappers such as John Colter, the geological underpinnings that create geothermal features, the roles of forest fire and successful wolf reintroduction, the art of Bierstadt and Remington, and the policy issues of managing an entity regulated by more than 30 state and federal agencies. The choice of a well-known region isn’t necessary, however; almost any area large or small can be examined in a similar way, with attention to its natural components and the ways people have interacted with them.

The Adirondacks provide an excellent example, though, of the impor-

tance of a sense of place. As historian Philip Terrie has written, “In the Adirondacks we have a landscape that could be a model for the world. It is a place where people live and where nature matters, where it is just this combination, this interrelationship between people and nature, that defines the place, provides its meaning, constructs its narrative.”<sup>6</sup> When the topic is as complex and compelling as the Adirondack Park, with issues that are so pertinent now and for the future, the course material is bound to draw student interest. The Adirondacks have become a “place” in the minds of us all. This awareness yields the third kind of interdisciplinarity—an integrated sense of place—and this is how a course on the Adirondacks achieves its greatest success and intellectual engagement.

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## Teaching Adirondack Science in an Interdisciplinary Context

PATRICK D. REYNOLDS

In offering scientific perspectives on the Adirondacks, we pay particular attention to the physical geology, climatology, and forest ecology of the region. While the goal of the course is to weave various perspectives together into a tapestry of comprehensive understanding of the region, of what today’s Park is and how it came to be, the nature of Adirondack science often lends itself to being taught in isolation. In some cases this is due to the limited scientific background or interest of students in our second-year nonmajors course, and in others to my own limitations, as a biologist, of understanding and knowledge of Adirondack cultural, social, and political history. Despite this, the learning environment of our class is one that privileges interdisciplinary learning, as has been defined and discussed here by Ernest Williams, and we emphasize it when possible. Here I present opportunities through which we have tried to weave together science and nonscience areas of the study of the Adirondacks in the hope of developing a richer and reciprocally illuminating understanding of the region in our students.

Teaching in an interdisciplinary way about the Adirondacks is different from reductionist approaches that characterize much of modern scientific study. In considering the forest ecology of the Adirondack Park, for example, adopting a narrow focus on the description of organismic diversity and processes is particularly limiting. The Adirondack “Park”

is, after all, a human construct, and an abstract concept insofar as levels of ecological organization are concerned. I need not elaborate here on the individuals who planted the notional seed of a forest preserve, the unique set of political and environmental conditions that allowed it to germinate, and the difficult and extraordinary blooming of constitutional protection and the legislative entity that is the Park. But if one considers the developmental constraints that a marked but nuanced logging, mining, hunting, and wood-resourced industrial history has written on the Adirondack forest, one is left with a place where no aspect of forest ecology can be described, taught, or learned without reference to human influence. Hence there is a particular obligation to provide a sound understanding of aspects of Adirondack science in a way that reflects and illuminates human experience in the Park.

While there are many opportunities to integrate biology or geology with the industrial exploitation of natural resources in the Adirondacks (examples include the economic fortunes of the logging industry as related to forest succession, the distribution of the tanning industry as related to hemlock stand and railway distributions, and the fortunes of mining industries as a function of mineral resource quality), the greater challenge has been in the integration—to whatever degree—of Adirondack ecology, geology, climatology, or environmental chemistry with representational or creative human activities. While this includes the visual arts and music, I focus here on examples from poetry and fiction to illustrate different degrees of the integration for which we strive. First, Emerson's poem "The Adirondacs" emphasizes the extent to which the history of science and scientific discovery in the Adirondacks penetrates even "the expression of the Imagination"; second, a passage from Russell Banks's novel *Cloudsplitter* reveals a deeper richness and, I believe, significance when the relationship between abandoned farms and forest succession is examined.

In 1858, Ralph Waldo Emerson led nine other intellectuals of the time—"luminaries" as he referred to them<sup>7</sup>—to spend a month at Follensby Pond in the western part of the Adirondacks. One of the members was the painter William James Stillman, who captured the party (the painting now resides in Massachusetts at the Concord Free Library); notably, on the left of Stillman's painting, is Louis Agassiz, "without doubt the greatest and most influential naturalist of nineteenth-century America,"

as described by Stephen Jay Gould,<sup>8</sup> despite Agassiz's persistent creationist viewpoint. As described in Paul Schneider's *The Adirondacks*, Agassiz is purported to be leading a dissection of a fish in Stillman's painting.<sup>9</sup> It may be true; he was indeed an expert on fish systematics, as well as being a stellar geologist. Louis Agassiz was Swiss, recruited by Harvard from Neuchâtel, and was a practical, field-trained, natural historian. Emerson, in his poem "The Adirondacs," describes Agassiz's activities in the Philosophers' Camp:

Two Doctors in the camp  
 Dissected the slain deer, weighed the trout's brain,  
 Captured the lizard, salamander, shrew,  
 Crab, mice, snail, dragon-fly, minnow, and moth;  
 Insatiate skill in water or in air  
 Waved the scoop-net, and nothing came amiss;  
 The while, one leaden pot of alcohol  
 Gave an impartial tomb to all the kinds.  
 Not less the ambitious botanist sought plants,  
 Orchis and gentian, fern, and long whip-scorpus,  
 Rosy polygonum, lake-margin's pride,  
 Hypnum and hydnum, mushroom, sponge, and moss,  
 Or harebell nodding in the gorge of falls.  
 Above, the eagle flew, the osprey screamed,  
 The raven croaked, owls hooted, the woodpecker  
 Loud hammered, and the heron rose in the swamp.  
 As water poured through hollows of the hills  
 To feed this wealth of lakes and rivulets,  
 So nature shed all beauty lavishly  
 From her redundant horn. . . .

We flee away from cities, but we bring  
 The best of cities with us, these learned classifiers,  
 Men knowing what they seek, armed eyes of experts.  
 We praise the guide, we praise the forest life;  
 But will we sacrifice our dear-bought lore  
 Of books and arts and trained experiment,  
 Or count the Sioux a match for Agassiz?  
 O no, not we!<sup>10</sup>

The poem provides an opportunity to discuss the context of early tourism in the Adirondacks, and the developing constituencies interested in recreation in the Park, and the significance of these intellectual “luminaries” in this regard. But it also provides a point of departure for examining the context of scientific knowledge and discovery at this time, and particularly how it pertained to the Adirondacks. Emerson clearly places *scientific* knowledge above that of the “forest life,” reflecting the ascendancy of science in western intellectual society at the time. He also documents an impressive record of Agassiz’s (and the botanist’s) collections during their time in camp. Part of Agassiz’s legacy at Harvard was the fruit of his many collecting expeditions from around the globe, which contributed to the valuable holdings at the Museum of Comparative Zoology; it can be said that this period in the history of natural sciences was marked by the documentation of diversity of life: species among habitats and the comparative anatomy among species. That Agassiz would bring such collection efforts to the Philosophers’ Camp probably reflects the lack of knowledge of diversity in the Adirondack region up to this point.

Agassiz provided another notable contribution to our scientific understanding of the Adirondacks, one that not only touches upon another scientific discipline but also provides students with an awareness of a strikingly visual characteristic of the region. This was his radical (at the time) interpretation that many Adirondack landscape features, such as eskers, drumlins, kettle ponds, and moraines, were created by glaciation. One of the most remarkable and commonly encountered features in the Adirondacks is erratics, large boulders seemingly placed at random across the countryside. Perhaps the most popular traditional view at the time held that the Great Flood lifted these mammoth rocks and deposited them when the waters receded; Agassiz challenged that in an 1840 publication, 18 years before the Philosophers’ Camp.

Russell Banks’s historical novel *Cloudsplitter* is an ambitious one for our course and students, not only for its length but also for its long descriptive narratives, early 1800s setting of language and custom, and the extremist perspective it presents. *Cloudsplitter* serves our course in a number of ways; in addition to giving life to the story of John Brown and the abolitionist movement, there are elegant representations of life in the Adirondack High Peaks region, through all seasons, with vivid images of the rural struggle in the first half of the nineteenth century. The

tanning industry and its use of hemlock bark, the progressive clearing of land for grazing and tillage, and organization of agricultural society all provide an historical view of mid- and post-settlement Adirondack society that is a uniquely valuable context for our students. Our reading of *Cloudsplitter* is necessarily truncated; we read several excerpts over a week of the course. It is a severely limited treatment, but how can we use it to promote an integrative understanding of the Adirondacks?

The story spans the years that John Brown had a homestead in North Elba near Lake Placid, through to the raid on Harper’s Ferry; it is narrated by John Brown’s only surviving son, Owen. The novel opens with Owen recounting his return to North Elba for the reinterment of his brothers and other members of his father’s party, 30 years after the failed raid. The narrative context is his being drawn back, piqued by academic researchers, to consider his former life and the events leading to Kansas and Harper’s Ferry. His narrative sense of place might be similar to what many students and visitors imagine and experience in the High Peaks region:

I had long believed . . . that I would arrive at North Elba from the east . . . that I would emerge from the broad shade of Mount Tahawas and McIntyre. At my back, long streaks of early morning sunlight would slide through familiar notches in the mighty Adirondacks Range and splash down the valleys and spread out at my feet before me like a golden sea washing across the tableland . . . with the snow covered peak of Whiteface beyond the house and a crisp Canada wind striking out of the Northwest.<sup>11</sup>

However, Owen is confronted with a very different image upon his actual return:

I came walking alone out of the northwest, with Lake Placid and scarred old Whiteface Mountain at my back . . . I was not alone on the road . . . behind them, where the road emerged from an overhanging thatch of tall white pines, came a second group . . . There was a light wind soughing in the high branches of the pines.

On my right, set up in the sugar maples, was the Thompson farm, gone to ruin now, with the barn half-fallen and the field on either side shifting back to chokecherry and scrub pine . . . Beyond the house, sheds, and barn . . . a grove of paper-white birches mingled with aspens on an



uphill meadow . . . On the further slopes, dark maples and oak switches twitched leafless in the breeze.<sup>12</sup>

In the space of a few paragraphs and a short walk, Banks mentions eight species, seven of trees, over a fifth of the trees found in the High Peaks region. He provides a cast of characters for examination of forest succession, particularly that associated with abandoned farms, a model system of one type of succession in the Adirondacks.

Farming in the Adirondacks was a marginal activity, economically. The weather patterns led to short growing seasons and caused limited decay and nutrient release in the soil, and with glacial deposition and erosion, the soils were rocky and infertile. By the mid-1800s, farms were being abandoned for a number of reasons: the industrial revolution provided an economically attractive urban alternative to this hardscrabble—felsenmeer farming—agriculture; accessibility to the West, to prairie grasslands and prospecting, was enhanced by improved rail networks; and the Civil War drew an upcoming generation of men away from the land.<sup>13</sup> The image of abandoned farms that Owen describes is still a vivid one for the region 150 years later.

Succession is the replacement of species in a community, over time or space, along an environmental gradient; that gradient can be elevation, moisture, nutrients, light, or other parameters. The exciting dynamic of succession is that species that appear first can change the environment, rendering conditions more suitable for other species and thereby leading to their own demise. With relatively limited diversity in the High Peaks, it is possible (even within the confines of this interdisciplinary course) to teach students recognition of species and understanding of successional stages that they may find while hiking or reading.

Knowledge of the typical growth conditions for the species that Owen mentions reveals the process of reclamation of farmland by the forest that those species represent. The road Owen traveled upon is lined with Eastern white pines (*Pinus strobus*), which are abundant in the Adirondacks; they are the tallest and fastest growing of the soft woods or conifers, “the aristocrat” as described by Edwin Ketchledge.<sup>14</sup> It is an early pioneer and aggressive invader of disturbed areas, especially abandoned fields, able to thrive in sandy and nutrient-poor soils. It is known as a “catastrophe species” by foresters for appearing in areas of drastic disturbance.<sup>15</sup> The Thompson farm of *Cloudsplitter* is set among sugar maples (*Acer sac-*

*charum*), the iconic tree species of the Adirondacks, a source of fall color and syrup. It is associated with mature, climax forest communities, in part because it is also the most tolerant hardwood, thriving in the open and surviving in shade, such as under faster-growing pioneering pines; seedlings in such conditions will grow faster to take advantage of breaks in the canopy through the death of taller, less tolerant, trees.<sup>16</sup>

The paper or “white” birch (*Betula papyrifera*) on the uphill meadow of the Thompson farm is another great pioneering aggressor; it is associated with the soils most severely depleted of organics. Its seed is prolific, disperses easily, and germinates rapidly, stabilizing sites and establishing stands quickly. It is intolerant of shade, and so cannot follow itself, but prepares the way for the next species in succession.<sup>17</sup> Mixed with the birch are aspen, of which there are two species found in the High Peaks region, quaking (*Populus tremuloides*) and bigtooth (*P. grandidentata*); both are opportunist pioneers and commonly found with paper birch in disturbed areas. In addition to seeds that parachute away by tiny hairs, new trees sprout from roots to contribute to aspens’ excellence in dominating newly available areas.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, Owen observes dark (red) maple (*Acer rubrum*) and oak (northern red, *Quercus rubra*, the only oak native to the High Peaks region) on more distant (uncleared) slopes. These species are less tolerant, associated with late stages of succession or more mature communities.<sup>19</sup>

Armed with this knowledge, what are students to do with it while reading *Cloudsplitter*? Ideally, we would like the students to begin to *landscape the reading* in their mind’s eye, infer ecology from what is being described to them in Owen’s descriptive narrative. Yes, Banks states the obvious, that the farms are long-abandoned. But the rich description of a mixed pioneer community—“catastrophe” species—that builds as Owen approaches the home of his youth, where he revisits the maturation of his father’s plans and the cause of his exile, and when he sees for the first time the graves of his family, brings a deeper sense of the passage of time and the distance of these tragic events. It belies abandonment not only of the farms in that community but also of an earlier life.

There are, of course, considerable limitations in our attempts of integrating science and literature in the teaching of the Adirondacks. We can’t go into any significant amount of detail; our treatment is no replacement for courses in forest ecology or environmental literature. So, what is the value of our efforts for students? We hope that the next time

our students go into the Adirondacks, they can know the place from new perspectives that are mutually informative, a different way of knowing from that which they receive in their major or monodisciplinary courses. Ideally, we hope that when they visit or read about other, perhaps similar but not necessarily so, environments, their work in our course will prompt a recognition of the complexities of sense of place and of how breadth of perspective can contribute to a depth of knowledge in regional studies.

### Literature of the Adirondacks in an Interdisciplinary Context

ONNO OERLEMANS

An interdisciplinary course on the Adirondack Park poses particular problems for the teaching of literature, especially when literary texts occupy only about an eighth of our classtime. The predominance of history and the sciences in the course, combined with the fact that many of our students have lived, traveled through, vacationed, camped, paddled, and hiked in the region, leads to a general perception of the Park as a clearly physical place: mountains and lakes and forests, rocks and stones and trees. Like Murray, Emerson, Colvin, and Headley before them, our students are drawn to the Park because it is a place to test and heal the body. Students long to get out of the classroom and into some more primary and primal reality, and so they see our field trips in some ways as the essence of the course. Because the Park is wilderness, it is real, more or less unchanging. The Park boundary, the famous Blue Line, exists to mark a space (over 6 million acres) that has naturally revealed itself and has been more or less preserved by the wisdom of conservationist elders.

As a literature professor and only partially regenerated deconstructionist, I am strongly inclined to undermine this easy conception of the material reality of the Park—to say with Alan Liu, William Cronon, and many others, that there is no “there” there—that the reality of the Park is the history of the ideas we have had of it. Most of all, I’m inclined to point to the Blue Line as a symbol of this: an arbitrary, entirely human construction. Its only reality is on maps, a clearly insipid attempt to frame and overlay an entirely imagined and necessarily fractured idea onto something itself inaccessible and probably unknowable. The func-

tions of the Blue Line are historical and regulatory; its shifting shape and size are signs of the shiftiness of our conception of the Park and of the land and wilderness within it.

One of the thrilling consequences of teaching this course is to see an easy poststructuralist irony undermined and complicated in all kinds of ways. The Blue Line is of course arbitrary in its specifics. It is a historical and political artifact. And yet it does vaguely outline a place that possesses a clearly distinct physical reality. The Adirondacks are special mountains—new mountains of old rock, a fist of subterranean pressure slowly punching up primordial rock, and thus not a part of the Appalachian chain. These facts lead to a series of other facts: that the Adirondacks’ climate and soils and waterways are different from those of the areas around it, which has had clearly tangible effects on its history. It has been extremely difficult to settle. It is like a piece of northern Quebec in upstate New York, except hillier and more densely forested, with no complete river throughways.

Teaching the biology, ecology, and geology of the Park also shows that nature itself is shifting and changeable, that wilderness is never one thing, but a competing series of over- and underlying processes. This is complicated enough, and for many students, it is epiphany enough. But the teaching of literature, of the centrality or power of imagination in confronting nature, is still useful in this context. A fundamental reality of the Park is still what we make it in our imaginations, and indeed people have imagined—and continue to imagine it—in wildly conflicting ways. That this conflict is possible, that given the reality of rocks and lakes and trees, people can imagine wilderness, escape, wealth, home, otherness, sublimity, and the picturesque, to name only a few of dozens of categories, is one of several fundamental insights our course offers.

So while my colleagues in the natural sciences attempt to reveal some of the complexity of the physical reality of the landscape and ecology of the Park, with them I attempt to reveal some of the complexity and processes of the imagined reality, or the reality produced by the imagination. It’s obvious that many of the current conflicts in the Park, centered on issues of development and preservation, arise out of how the space of the Park is imagined as much as it actually is. Teaching literature about the region reveals not only that this place has been imagined in dramatically different ways but also that the imagination affects and in some ways reconfigures it.



William Murray's *Adventures in the Wilderness* (1869) provides a clear example of how imagining a place has directly affected what it becomes. It is also an unintentionally comic example of what happens when you blend a guide book with fiction. Murray celebrates the Adirondack region as rivaling Switzerland in scenery, for being easily accessible by virtually anyone, for great hunting and fishing, and for rapidly improving the mental and physical health of all who travel there. (Indeed, himself a minister, he urges that "every church make up a purse, and pack its worn and weary pastor off to the North Woods for a four weeks' jaunt," since "it is astonishing how much a loving, spiritually-minded people can bore their minister."<sup>20</sup>) The success of the book, and as many inspired tourists discovered, its greatest scam, was to insist that travel to and within the Park was extraordinarily easy and cheap. The black fly, he insisted, is "a monster existing only in men's feverish imaginations,"<sup>21</sup> and the mosquito could be easily countered by making sure that all parts of one's body were covered in clothing, netting, or tar. Most surprising, Murray insisted that visiting the Adirondack region required absolutely no "physical exertion": "It is the laziest of all imaginable places, if you incline to indolence. Tramping is unknown in this region. Wherever you wish to go your guide paddles you."<sup>22</sup> Complete with detailed accounts of how to get to the wilderness, what to bring, and how much it would cost, this most famous guide to the Park is padded with highly dramatized accounts of Murray's specific adventures, which include running his boats over nonexistent falls and shooting at a loon in revenge for the loon's calls having spooked a deer he'd been hunting the evening before.

Most of us would be hard pressed to classify Murray's work as "literary," and yet it is perhaps the most obvious example of how writing has affected people's perceptions of the Adirondacks. Murray did not create the idea of wilderness as sublime, as a place where one might meet God, where body and soul could be healed and made strong, recuperating from the disease and weakness of cultured and censored life; he did, though, inextricably link the Adirondack region with these imagined realities. And he significantly helped to instigate the first major wave of tourism in the 1870s that began the development of communities, facilities, and homes that existed primarily to serve tourists, rather than loggers, trappers, miners, and farmers who had been the Park's primary residents.

As mentioned above, we also teach Emerson's poem "The Adiron-

dacks," first published in 1867. Simply introducing Emerson in the course allows us to discuss the rise of Romanticism in the nineteenth century; we can then show too that ideas about what wilderness is, and how it should be valued, changed radically from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Asking students to remember Emerson's essay "Nature," we see the beginnings of the idea that wilderness can be understood as an imagined escape from culture, a setting within which we can, as Emerson says, "enjoy an original relation to the universe."<sup>23</sup> More interestingly, and perhaps more profoundly, we see in Emerson's poem the introduction of wilderness as a place for recreation and vacation. Emerson describes how he recreates himself in the wilderness; he vacates his old city-self, indulging in explicitly boyish games of shooting, hunting, camping. The men play at being Indians, explorers, and boys, becoming, like their guides, "sinewy" and ultimately "Lords of this realm."

We trode on air, contemned the distant town,  
Its timorous ways, big trifles, and we planned  
That we should build, hard-by, a spacious lodge,  
And how we should come hither with our sons,  
Hereafter,—willing they, and more adroit.<sup>24</sup>

Emerson celebrates this place not just as ideal for physical exertion, as a way for men to become boys so that they can become men again; it's also a place where the imagination is given free reign to recreate the self. Wilderness becomes a playground. Though the actual park has not yet been imagined, Emerson's poem clearly reflects a fundamental conception of wilderness as park—where city folk go to transform themselves temporarily and to play at being something they are not. That this is ever to be only a temporary transformation is clearly signaled by the ending of the poem, in which Emerson is happily called back to the reality of culture and city by news of the successful laying of the transatlantic cable, which brings about a sudden series of celebrations of culture, learning, and the progress of the "free race with front sublime."

We flee away from cities, but we bring  
The best of cities with us, these learned classifiers,  
Men knowing what they seek, armed eyes of experts.  
We praise the guide, we praise the forest life;  
But will we sacrifice our dear-bought lore

Of books and arts and trained experiment,  
 Or count the Sioux a match for Agassiz?  
 O no, not we! Witness the shout that shook  
 Wild Tupper Lake; witness the mute all-hail  
 The joyful traveler gives, when on the verge  
 Of craggy Indian wilderness he hears  
 From a log-cabin stream Beethoven's notes  
 On the piano, played with master's hand.<sup>25</sup>

The wonderful or disturbing irony of this, of course, is that Emerson's conception of wilderness as playground has become fundamental to the way the Park is now imagined and understood by a significant proportion of the people who visit rather than live in the Park.

The most significant literary text we teach in the class is Russell Banks's novel *Cloudsplitter*. One of the novel's great ambitions is to reassert that John Brown is deeply emblematic of American culture. Crucial for our course, it also depicts the Adirondacks as crucial to John Brown's imagination. The novel thus becomes a multilayered reimagining of the Adirondacks as a vital center of abolitionist activity; as a place where freed slaves attempted to establish themselves, in the actual town of Timbuctoo, near North Elba; controversially, as a part of the underground railroad; and ultimately, symbolic not just of John Brown's violent imaginings of freedom but of freedom in general. The novel is explicit about the ability, and the need for, the literary imagination to continually reforge how wilderness is understood.

The novel does all this by showing symbols being constructed out of wilderness through the self-conscious working of imagination. The most obvious symbol is the mountain we now know as Marcy, called in the novel (and historically) Tahawus or Cloudsplitter. Banks aims for the Whitmanesque effect of reinscribing the present with the past, so that the implied ideal reader can come to reenvision the mountain in the present as Owen Brown, the novel's narrator, does:

Off to my left and behind me looms the craggy granite peak whose very name I cannot let enter my mind without Father's dark face also entering there, for I have come over the years to associate the two, as if each, mountain and man, were a portrait of the other and the two, reduced to their simplest outlines, were a single, runic inscription which I must, be-

fore I die, decipher, or I will not know the meaning of my own existence of its own worth.<sup>26</sup>

This is an effect that is, like Brown himself, both violent and liberating. On the one hand, it is an act of naked arrogance, a strong claim by Owen/Banks for us to see the history of a heroic man as inscribed in nature itself. On the other hand, this act of imaginative inscribing is shown to be creative and endless, an essential part of encounters with wilderness. As Owen says at the beginning of the novel in a moment of lyric responsiveness as he returns to North Elba, and following a detailed description of the John Brown farm as we can still see it (more or less) today:

I was situated at that moment in the turning of the northern year, when the end of winter and the start of spring overlap like shingles on a roof and the natural world seems doubled in thickness and density. A slight shift in the direction of the wind cools the air a single degree, and suddenly a puddle of standing water is covered with a skin of ice that, seconds later, as the same wind parts the clouds and opens the sky, melts in the sunlight. At this moment, all is change. Transformation seems permanent. I was trembling with a type of excitement that I had never felt before, a powerful mixture of anticipation and regret, as if I somehow knew that eternal gain and irretrievable loss were about to be parceled out equally—as if justice were about to be made a material thing.<sup>27</sup>

This is a vision of the natural world that any of us might have any time, a lyric evocation of the present, though it is set in the spring of 1889. The effect of this is for us to see the Adirondacks not as wilderness, untouched by culture, but as suffused with history. It has always been inhabited and altered, but it is also still vitally open to re-creation. It shows that wilderness is a physical reality that reveals and responds to our desires for it.

WE'VE TRIED TO SHOW at least two things in our discussions. First, that in developing an interdisciplinary course that leads to an understanding of a specific place, disciplinary specificity is necessary and useful. The knowledge and methodologies we bring as biology and literature professors are indispensable to the way we construct the course and teach individual classes. We make no effort to yield or soften our

expertise. Second, the insights that spring from what is in some ways a forced and arbitrary yoking of these disciplines to each other exceed the sum of their parts. We feel the complex reality of the Park must first be broken into the components provided by disciplines, so that they can later be brought together in a deeper understanding of the relationships among them. We have offered a few concrete examples of such insights that we hope stand for the larger sense of place our students develop throughout the course.

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### Notes

1. Lattuca, 81.
2. Lattuca, 81.
3. Marchand, 8.
4. Sagoff, 252.
5. Gussow, 27.
6. Terrie, 183.
7. Schneider, 166.
8. Gould, 108.
9. Schneider, 191.
10. Emerson, *Collected Poems*, 152–153, 157.
11. Banks, 13.
12. Banks, 13.
13. Marchand, 16.
14. Ketchledge, 50.
15. Ketchledge, 50, 52.
16. Ketchledge, 135.
17. Ketchledge, 107, 108.

18. Ketchledge, 96, 98, 99, 101.
19. Ketchledge, 118, 120, 121, 139, 141.
20. Murray, 23–24.
21. Murray, 56.
22. Murray, 51.
23. Emerson, *Essays*, 7.
24. Emerson, *Collected Poems*, 153.
25. Emerson, *Collected Poems*, 157.
26. Banks, 689.
27. Banks, 18.

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