

Selected TREE Journals

from Science, Society, & Environment, Spring 2011



Taught by:

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The eight journals in this document were part of an assignment by Matt Mariola in conjunction with the exhibition **Trees: an interdisciplinary dialogue**, organized by The College of Wooster Art Museum, January 18-March 6, 2011. Below is Matt's assignment.

Assignment:

Choose any tree on campus whose species name you can identify. This map of campus will help:

http://www3.wooster.edu/grounds/tree_map/default.php

You are to visit your tree and spend a little time with it on three different occasions: once in the dead of winter (before the end of Feb.); once in early spring (when it is starting to bud out, but has not yet leafed out); and once when leaves have started to form.

Each time, take one or more photos of the tree, particularly its branches with the sky as background.

Each time, write a minimum of 150 words as a reflection on the tree: any particular observations you may have about it at that time of year, thoughts, appreciation, criticism, creative writing, even poetry.

Finally, you must include at least 200 words of general background -- scientific name, a little history, geographic range, and historical uses of that particular species.

Package this all together (which tree; where it's located; background; three reflections from three different visits; and at least three photos from three different visits) and turn it in electronically as a Word document or PDF.

“Dead of Winter”

It is actually about 65 degrees fahrenheit on this “wintry” February afternoon. This unseasonable weather is much appreciated all over campus. Fridays are usually good days, understandably since one can pretend he or she is finished with all obligations for at least one of the following two days. This Friday in particular seems to have much more enjoy (read: celebrate) than a normal one. I have finished the first round of midterms for the semester and look forward to a visit from a friend from home—all the way from Boston. I could hardly contain myself after my last class ended and was nearly ecstatic just at the thought of taking my first picture of my tree. The probability of a more lovely Friday than this one seems excruciatingly small, and of course that notion causes me to think there must be something forboding about this “better-than-ordinary”. The juxtaposition of shining sun, along with the unexpected warmth, and the barrenness present in the winter stages of all we consider to be nature is slightly humorous—if one can observe that contradiction without reminding oneself it is yet another example which confirms global warming. This unnatural pairing could serve as more proof that the climate in which we have lived has, in essence, “lost touch” with the nature it surrounds.

Early Spring”

Significantly colder and wetter than when I last visited my tree, I feel as though “dreary” does not quite cut it as an accurate description of this day. It seems at times to want to become a nice, spring day; however, whatever bad weather force the spring appears to be battling overpowered it for the majority of my waking hours. Drudging through the semi-warm, semi-cold, slightly rainy, super windy conditions of the campus, I have found solace in the fact that my tree does appear to have budded...in a couple of places. Have I not mentioned that I am slightly ill, while traversing through the mud and wet leaves and mini-tornadoes? It is more than likely nothing about which to be concerned. No more concerned than about the small progress my tree is making. Perhaps we will see real blooming (do leaves bloom? Maybe growth is a better term) when the climate and nature get on the same cosmic page.

“Real Spring”

How is the weather? More in line with what I would expect, given the time of year. I have come to realize the weather has been my immediate and instinctual observation. It tends to be the first thing my father asks me about whenever I talk to him while I am away at school, or away from home for any period of time. Some sort bonding mechanism? I like to think so. As I was alluding to earlier, it was quite a pleasant and sunny day, so do not let those clouds fool you...even though they eventually fooled me, since it rained three hours later, but that fact is probably irrelevant. There are actual leaves on my tree! They are considerably smaller than I hoped they would be at this stage in my picture-taking. Their existence, however, has made me optimistic that climate change has not completely confused nature's way of being. I will probably, unconsciously, keep tabs on my tree and its many stages (or lack thereof) and relation to the weather.

This Princeton American Elm tree, *Ulmus Americana*, was located near the center of the academic quad. It is among the fifty-three elm trees that populate the College of Wooster's campus. Native to North America, including parts of Southeastern Canada, the American Elm, a deciduous tree, covers over much of the United States, including nearly the entire East coast (as far south as central Florida and much of northwestern and central "Texas") and as far West as the Great Plains. Historically, the bark of American elms was often used by Native Americans for herbalism in decoctions: a technique in which the bark is boiled in order to extract what are thought to be healing substances. Elms are now most often used ornamentally, as street or lawn trees, though they have largely been affected by *Ceratocystis Ulmi* or "Dutch elm disease", a wilt fungus which has nearly wiped out the species. Interestingly enough, the variety of American elm present on campus, "Princeton", has frequently proven resistant to Dutch elm disease.

I'd still rather admire it with the sun and warm weather as my companions however.

Visit One:

It is the middle of winter, and I have picked a tree I have admired since the previous year. A White Birch, located outside the northeast door of Taylor Hall, it has always stood out during spring and fall and always gave me a reprieve coming out of my calculus courses. Its white bark always contrasts beautifully with the green leaves and its design offers something different than a traditional "tree." It's not often that a tree blends into the snow behind it, but that's the case in this situation; the creamy colored bark looks semi-out of place, standing next to many trees with light and dark brown trunks. I always like seeing occurrences in nature that just take your breath away, and this tree has done so many a time; I look back upon the image I have in my head of this tree in the fall, where the warm weather and bright colors of the leaves compliment each other, both pleasant on that day. I am not a big fan of the cold, but seeing this tree that stands out so much is almost worth it; The "White Birch," or "Paper Birch," is scientifically known as *Betula papyrifera*, a deciduous (broad leaves) tree commonly found in northern North America. White Birches usually grow to about 70-80 feet high with a 10-12 inch diameter and flower in late spring. Staminate flowers grow at the end of the branches and mature to about 4-10 centimeters. Very slender with a narrow crown, they are fairly short living trees, as few live past 140 years, and their height often ceases after about 60 years of age. They have highly recognizable white bark, which has horizontal grooves and peels off in very thin pieces, and has many uses. Because the bark is waterproof, it was often used to cover the canoes of the Native Americans, and due to its lightness and palpability, it was preferred for basket making and storage containers. The wood is fairly strong and flexible, so it was commonly the choice material for spears, bows and arrows, and today is popular for making furniture. Due to the high oil content, the bark is considered a good fire starter and is often used in fireplaces and stoves. The White Birch is very useful in the re-vegetation and soil stabilization of overused soils. The White Birch is a popular landscaping tree due to its distinct bark and relative ease of maintaining.

Visit Two:

It's mid-spring and I'm enjoying the fact that it's not snowing and below freezing! The buds on the White Birch are starting to appear; giving me hope that spring is actually almost here, that warm weather does actually make its way to northeast Ohio. It's fairly mild, yet not short-sleeve weather, and the sun had left a beautiful glow on the horizon. The white bark isn't as noticeable with the sun gone for the night, yet its branches still swung proudly in the wind. I usually like large trees, with branches I can see from across campus. However, this White Birch looks mature, yet is not intimidating, offering yet another unique characteristic from its brothers and sisters around it. I am not a traditional "tree-hugger," but I quietly admire aspects about nature everyday. Not to sound cheesy, but the beauty nature and all of its components provide is truly incredible. Unfortunately, I spend too much time waiting for fall to arrive, where every tree contributes its own color, and not enough around the year.

Visit Three:

It's supposedly springtime, but the weather is a little chilly. We had a couple days of incredibly warm weather last week, but obviously spring was just teasing us. Although it's not as warm as I would like, the sun is shining today, providing a perfect photo opt; with all the rain we've had, everything around campus has exploded into a green frenzy. Two weeks ago these trees weren't sure if it was time, yet now there's no denying spring is here, albeit the absence of warm weather. Compared to the two previous visits, the colors of the tree are truly vibrant, bolstered by the welcomed presence of the sun. After doing research on the White Birch, I now know that these brown objects, looking like skinny, elongated pinecones, dangling from the tree are staminate flowers. I can hear the traffic speeding by on the road nearby, yet feel a sense of quietness when looking at the tree, as if outside factors aren't as important at this moment. I am glad I picked this tree, and will surely remember it for the rest of my tenure at Wooster. We could all use an extra friend in life, right?

Entry 1

My decision to keep tabs on the tree I chose came from my appreciation for weeping willows. Weeping willows are possibly my single most favorite tree and I was convinced that this tree on campus was a willow of some kind. I have passed this tree countless times over the past two years in Wooster and leapt at the chance to discover more about it. A couple of my friends have visited this tree in order to hide within the dome of its branches. Some of us have taken pictures of our playtime with it.

I actually took the time to look at it during the winter season and was a little sad for it. Like most trees during the cold months, it shed its leaves and became something that looked less like a willow and more like a nervous system. The branches stick up and out and down and in. They choose not to follow the pattern that I normally associate with tree branches. The branches on "my" tree did not have a lot of jutting, angled branches. It, instead, had very flowing branches that all ended up pointing toward the earth below it. Only at the very top did a few branches reach toward the heavens.

When I checked on it later in the snowy season, it looked as if it was protecting the ground below from the weather. When the snow was beginning to melt (for the first time), a ring appeared below the lowest branches. I could imagine a small animal making its home at the base of the tree, and allowing the tree to be a canopy.

Entry 2

Apparently, I was wrong about the tree's species. It is not very surprising when you know that I am not an arborist. The tree is commonly known as a European Weeping Birch and its scientific name is *Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula.' When I decided it was a cousin of the weeping willow, I was only half correct. It normally flowers during late April or early May so I'll be waiting to see the tree wrapped in green once again. As its name suggests, this flavor of beech is native to Europe, not the United States of America. There is a story about how the weeping beech came to America. It might be some fiction, it might be fact, or it might be what someone believed to be true at some point in time.

The story begins in Belgium and features Baron De Mar. The Baron was planting a plot of beech trees on his estate and was slightly disgusted at the sight of the gnarled and deformed looking beech. He demanded that the abomination be disposed of at once. The gardener held a certain fascination with the dejected looking tree and cared for it against the Baron's wishes. When the tree was fully grown the Baron found it to be the most majestic tree on his property and decided to share this tree with his friends. He sent to them shoots of the weeping beech as gifts. Years later a nurseryman of Flushing, NY named Samuel Parsons was touring Europe in search for exotic trees. He came across a weeping beech, a descendant of the Belgian Baron's, and decided to bring it home with him. He bought one and took it to Flushing, making it the first weeping beech in the Americas.

Entry 3

It is the end of the year and I am severely disappointed. I was waiting for my tree to bloom and it never did. Right now there are buds on there that suggest it may bloom over the next few weeks, but I was hoping to see it in its greenery before the year came to a close. The weather has improved greatly and the ground is a carpet of green. I pass the weeping beech hoping for a change, and I am rewarded with buds. I suppose the most disappointing thing about the tree is not that it is still bare, but that the nearby trees are flowering in abundance. I see its neighbors producing bright petals and large leaves while the weeping beech is still a skeleton. It is probably just biding its time. When the other trees are done with their "pretty" stage of growth and start preparing to produce seeds, this one will bulk up with its beech leaves and become the mysterious tee-pee tree that looks out of place on the Wooster campus.

Upon close inspection, the tree is actually looking more alive as of late. The ends of the branches are producing a little color (the sign of a tree ready to bloom). The weeping beech reminds me how much fun tree climbing can be. The branches are smooth and low to the ground, making it perfect for the initial thrust up the tree. The branches are also very wavy and surprisingly comfortable when you want to sit and look out the branches.

I. Background

The tree I have chosen is a Serviceberry tree (*Amelanchier canadensis*). According to The College of Wooster tree map, it was planted in 2006 in memory of Dr. Ted Williams, who was a chemistry professor.¹ Often also known as Juneberry, Saskatoon Berry, Shadblow, or Shadbush, this tree is often classified as a large shrub because of its varying sizes. It occupies the same family of plants as roses. A deciduous shrub, they “grow in the understory of temperate forests.”² The Serviceberry can grow to be over twenty feet tall with a dense bushy mass of branches underneath that can spread over ten feet. It also has leaves that are about two inches long and have a fuzzy white coating when young but become a shiny green as they grow older.³ In the spring, the flowers are white while unfolding, and only last about a week. After they fall off, the berries begin to ripen. At first they are green, but then change to red and mature into a “purple-black color” when ripe.⁴ The berries taste much like a blueberry and are popular among makes of jam and fruit cocktails. The Native Americans grew the Serviceberry tree when white settlers arrived, but there is not a large market for Serviceberries today.⁵ Native to the United States, the most common areas of growth of the Serviceberry tree are the Pacific coastal U.S. regions from Alaska to California and the Rocky Mountains.

II. First Entry (February 11, 2011)

On a cold day, the Serviceberry stands stark and bleak against the grey sky, ice hanging from its branches, weighing it down so far it looks as if a few of the branches are about to snap. At the same time, the ice is sort of beautiful. It seems as if the tree is stuck in a pose, literally frozen and unable to move. I walk up to it and look at the ice. It looks like tentacles stretching out for freedom; an escape. The first thing that came to mind were the tentacles of a man o’ war jellyfish. It has a sort of crown of a few branches stretching skyward, searching for something. It looks weak and subdued, although I can hardly blame it because if I were covered in ice in freezing temperatures I would probably feel the same way. At the same time, there is an element of defiance, as if it’s saying, “bring it on winter, I’m unfazed.” Standing stoic against the harsh winter conditions is all the tree can do. It has no mother or father to tuck it in and protect it against the weather; it is perhaps the most individual plant on the planet. It gets its own food, grows by itself, and then dies without anyone mourning; the solitary entity. It never gets any thanks, it just goes about its day to day business with an unwavering determination to live.

III. Second Entry (April 28, 2011)

With the exception of the absence of ice and snow, the Serviceberry tree does not look much different than it did in the dead of winter (February 11). There is still that hint of the reddish brown bark that almost silhouettes the tree against the background. However, there are hints of buds that are starting to come out. It almost seems as if the tree is prepping for something bigger; just staying on the sideline until it can bloom and become the center of attention. The green grass provides a nice contrast between the brown of the bark and the blue of the sunny sky. Spring is already here, although the weather has been a bit cold. But the Serviceberry stands stoic throughout all weather conditions, only blooming when the conditions are exactly right. It stands idly by as college students, faculty, staff, and townspeople pass by without paying any attention to the rather large tree to their right or left. It is waiting for the opportune moment to showcase its ability to beautify the landscape. Then, and perhaps only then, will it get the attention it deserves. Even so, the Serviceberry may never get the respect it deserves for beautifying our campus and sucking carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas that might be the cause of global warming, out of the atmosphere and sequestering it within its leaves and branches. This goes unseen, but it may be its most important job.

Saucer Magnolia

For this project I choose the Saucer Magnolia tree outside of Severance. If you were to face the front of Severance, this tree could be found on the far left along the corner of the building. The scientific name for this tree is *Magnolia X Soulangeana*. In 1820, the Saucer Magnolia became the first Magnolia hybrid. Magnolias' have populated the Earth for over 100 million years. They are considered the most primitive types of flowering plants with true seeds. There are more than 80 species of magnolias; several of which are native to North America. The Saucer Magnolia is a low-branched tree with large, saucer-shaped flowers. It can grow to be 20-30 feet in height, and approximately 25 feet wide. The Saucer Magnolia can grow in acidic, loamy, moist, rich, sandy, well drained, and clay soils. They are able to tolerate poor soil, and air pollution. It tends to blossom in the early spring, and flowers are pinkish-purple on the outside and white on the inside. These trees can be found all across the United States; in fact they are one of the most popular flowering trees. This tree is often found in Europe as well. Saucer Magnolia's are often used for decorative purposes; they are historically used for landscaping.

February

When I went to photograph this tree for the first time, I thought it looked really beautiful next to the building. The rigidness of the building with the juxtaposition of the tree is breath taking. When I was looking at the tree, with the building as the backdrop, I was consumed by the thought that nature will prevail. This seems like an odd concept on a campus where trees are so highly regarded, and one would not think of destroying the trees. What I am referring to by saying that nature will prevail is that despite the amount of time the school spends planting and maintaining the trees, a tree cannot be controlled. The bends and twists in the branches, is what made this idea come to mind. It looks almost like the branches are rebelling against the rigidness of the building. In addition to this, there is something fascinating and beautiful about a tree that has branches coated in ice. In the winter, iced branches are one of my favorite sights.

Early April

When I went to observe my tree today, I was very excited to find that it was beginning to bloom. Since it has remained so cold since spring began I would imagine that blooming is occurring late this year. I found it interesting how the flowers are blooming out of the seeds that were frozen last time I look photographs. The budding flowers are a very pretty shade of pink; I am excited to see what the tree looks like when it's fully bloomed. It's starting to become clear why the Saucer Magnolia tree is used for landscaping. I am starting to see that despite the season, this tree is always beautiful. Through this project I have a new appreciation for the trees found around Severance. I have found that I observe this tree on a daily basis now, when previously I hadn't given it much thought. I am developing a deeper appreciation for the trees around campus that we tend to pass by without a thought.

Late April

After several weeks of waiting, I went to my tree today and it had finally bloomed! Recently, I had become frustrated with the fact that my tree had not yet bloomed; I had started to lose hope that it would bloom before the assignment was due. When I saw the flowers on my tree today, I was completely surprised and it took my breath away. When I began this assignment I when online and looked at hundreds of pictures of my tree while attempting to learn more about it; these pictures, however, paled in comparison with actually seeing my tree fully bloomed. I think what surprised me the most was that I walked past this tree everyday last year, and I never gave it a thought. Due to this assignment, I began to notice my tree, and other trees, on a daily basis. I was able to see the little changes that occurred over the course of several weeks before it was ready to bloom. Until now, I did not realize how beautiful these transformations are. What I liked the most about my tree today was the color of the flowers. The flowers were a pretty shade of pink on the outside, but a clean shade of white on the inside. I was surprised to find this, and thought it made the flowers even alluring. Overall, I really loved this assignment, and I am very grateful that I was able to see my tree reach full bloom.

Ok, so I have a confession to make. I never left my house to take this picture. I just leaned out the back door of YOST house at the south end of campus and snapped this picture of the middle aged oak tree which is only about twenty feet from my house. The oak which, after reading a little about oaks online I estimated to be a Burr Oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*) between 50 and 75 years old. The Burr Oak is common throughout the East and the Midwest including being one of the main staple trees in the Appalachian Mountains and its long straight and thick trunk has been used for centuries as an important timber source. The Burr typically grows to be around 120 feet with a trunk nearly three feet thick. An ascetically pleasing tree and intensely hearty tree, they have been planted from Alberta Canada to Houston Texas. This type of flexibility made the Burr oak an attractive tree for cities as well as it has a relatively shallow root base and small water usage.

Given the fact that the houses at the southern end of campus, including the one I live in, are from around the 1950's it would make sense that this tree would have been planted at that time. Home in Maryland my neighborhood is full of a large oak trees like this one, including one which is only about ten feet out my back door literally in the middle of my deck. It's really nice being around the familiar trees, the same kind of bark and leaves and acorns give a sense of being back home. When I was looking at Wooster for school, what seems like ages ago now it was the oaks throughout campus that I think really sold my family that this was the place for me. When I pitched to my dad, an upstate New York boy, on school in Ohio he was originally skeptical, thinking Ohio was flat and full of short scrub trees. However when he came here on a visit with me he looked up and around at the trees and then looked at me and just smiled. He was sold too. What attracted me to this tree in particular, in addition to its convenient proximity to my place of residence, was its unique branch structure. Unlike the oaks I am used to back home with levels of branches spaced out equally as they rise, this tree has its branches stacked nearly on top of the other. Furthermore, instead of sagging down with weight, even the largest limbs continue to climb at a rather steep angle.

This has been a frustrating spring to say the least. Lots of rain and cold and gray and rain and rain. I heard one person say that Ohio doesn't have a spring but instead an endless war between winter and summer. For the majority of the spring it seemed like winter was winning. However, last week summer began its counter attack. With the warmer weather the tree finally decided to start budding and cast off the seemingly endless cloak of winter. I waited till nearly the end of the year to take this picture and even still there is not a real sign of major change just a slight glimmer of things to come. Perhaps the hearty nature of the tree makes it more reserved less likely to risk budding.

I got to thinking about this today, if tree could talk what would they say? There are of course famous old trees in Boston and Washington which I'm sure have seen their fair share. A tree by the book depository in Dallas I'm sure could clear up a bit of a mystery. But I'm sure that any tree on a college campus would have a lot of stories to tell. Not only would there be the obligatory stories about stupid frat kids urinating on, or trying to hug you in the middle of the night, there would be stories of how the whole campus and spirit of the school has changed. My tree would have a good stories about the construction of the new admissions building and how life on south campus has changed. Some of the oldest trees on this campus could tell us about fires and rebuilding, renovations and new buildings, the trees have seen this campus grow and change and the school transform and student after student cross beneath their limbs.

Background:

I thought I'd picked an unusual tree — it was shorter and branchy, and looked nothing like the huge oaks and flowered trees that dominate the college's campus. Besides that, the tree wasn't identifiable on the "tree map" that labels most of the trees on campus. Surely that meant it was extremely rare and unidentifiable, I thought. Evidently, I was wrong. After going through several "tree identifier" programs, I determined that my specimen was actually one of the most common deciduous trees of eastern North America — *Acer Rubrum*, the red maple. So much for being unique.

The Red Maple is aptly named. Most seasons it is actually red — in the summer, it is characterized by maroon leaf stems. When autumn comes around, the leaves turn a deep crimson. Buds cling to the limbs like droplets of blood in winter. And in springtime, little red flowers sprout from the leaves. The red maple occupies one of the largest eastern north-south ranges in North America - from Canada to the tip of Florida. The tree is very resilient and can grow in nearly any conditions. One might find it in a swamp, a meadow, in dry, nutrient-lacking soil, and anywhere in between. Though it's used most often in landscaping, the red maple produces good syrup and quality lumber. It also has a long history, especially in the United States, with furniture production.

First Observation:

It's that point of the year when winter seems like it will never end. When I was growing up (and living farther south), February signaled the end of winter. Now it's just a continuation of the same cold that's been plaguing us since late October. An ice storm just hit the Midwest, and is sweeping east and north of us — good thing the year is so young, otherwise this tree would be knocked out (figuratively. As in, the leaves probably would have frozen). Every tiny split on every tiny branch is covered in a layer of sheer, gleaming ice. The whole tree is heavy, tired — weighed down with who knows how many pounds of frozen water. Classes were canceled today. Most humans got to stay inside, basking in our semi-climate controlled rooms and lazing around. This sucker has to stand outside forever, hibernating and dreaming of better, warmer days, when it can soak up sunlight in its leaves and bring up water through the trunk and do whatever else it is that trees enjoy doing with their lives. Hopefully the ice won't break off any limbs on this baby. I've already seen a lot of fallen branches around campus.

Second Observation:

The branch I photographed for the close-up last time is broken, jagged edges marking the wound at the scene of the incident. The remainder of the branch still dangles there, though it doesn't look like it will last long. I keep thinking of Nearly Headless Nick, one of the ghosts in the Harry Potter series. Though Nick's head was there to stay — this branch is clinging uselessly. One winter, when I was younger, the cold ended early, even for Tennessee. Everyone naïvely rejoiced, believing that the mild weather of spring was there to stay. And it did, for a month or so. This gave many of the trees in the area plenty of time to send out feelers and decide that it was a safe time to bloom in earnest. The trees (and we) were all wrong. A sudden, hard frost occurred late in the season, killing the fresh, bright buds the trees had blithely thrown out. True springtime in Tennessee was subdued that year — my dad used to always say that the trees had been hurt, and tricked, and would wait until the next year to try again. I don't know that is true or not, but there was a lot less green that year. And when autumn came and tourists drove through to see the colors, they were inevitably disappointed. At the time, my sisters and I (the unwilling rakers), were okay with this, since it meant less work for our aching arms and blistered hands. We had a large yard, with enormous oaks and dogwoods and maples. But when the next spring came and the new leaves were still shy, it dawned upon us that perhaps it wasn't a very good thing after all.

Third Observation:

It's about time, tree. I thought you were never going to bloom, and that I'd end up writing extra long entries on the dead winter-type maple, rather than the leafy, bright maple. This is much better. Really. It's encouraging to see you out for other reasons as well. We've had a few warmer days these past few weeks, but for the most part it is still far too cold in this state. If I had known how bad Ohio winters were before I came to school here, there's no way I would have enrolled. As it stands, I have one winter left to endure here. After that, I'm headed straight down south, where the trees don't have to stand there naked for half of the year. I'm only seeing the faintest of a red tinge on some of your leaves. The all-knowing Internet tells me that, in spring, little red flower buds sprout from your leaves. Evidently, you aren't there yet. Maybe that's your way of preserving yourself and waiting out the cold weather. Probably a good idea — we don't want any freak snowstorms wiping out all of your hard work. Yeah, it's May, and yeah, it's unlikely, but I don't want to rule it out. Better safe than sorry. I'm interested to see what you'll look like in a month. It's too bad I'm never in the area during the warmer seasons of Ohio. I feel like I'm missing out on all the good stuff.

Introduction and Brief Summary of Oak Trees

I was determined that whatever tree I chose would have to be an oak tree. I had just read "Oak: The Structure of Civilization" and decided that I needed, and wanted, to know more about this species. The article helped me re-imagine the infrastructure of our society, and I realized that our civilization would not be far without the help of trees. Oak, which is a tree or shrub in the genus *Quercus*, is especially useful in architecture and construction because it is a tough, hard, high-density wood, and is "attractively grained" (Columbia Encyclopedia). According to English folklore, Oak symbolized courage and royalty and was specifically associated with the Royal Navy (Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore). Also, in 2004, congress designated the oak as America's National Tree, and it even symbolizes rank in the United States Armed Forces (gold oak leaf indicated a Major or Lt. Commander, whereas a silver oak indicates a Lt. Colonel or commander).

Oaks are also a keystone species and live in a wide range of habitats from Mediterranean semi-desert to subtropical rainforest. However, due to poor land management, livestock grazing, unsustainable farming, and exploitation for timber, fuel wood, and charcoal, many species of oak are in danger of extinction. In addition, Oak is used in a variety of different ways such as for charcoal, flooring, boxes, crates, vehicle parts, ships, agriculture tools, caskets, fence posts, pulp and paper products (Mcgraw-Hill Science & Technology).

An Oak with sharp lobed leaves is most likely a black [or red] oak, while smooth lobed leaves and acorns that mature in one year tells us that it is a white oak. My tree is a black oak, more specifically a pin oak (*Quercus Palustris*) In fact, pin oaks are often favored as a shade tree because its fibrous root system and symmetry. Under optimum conditions, pin oaks can reach up to 70 feet tall and 40 feet wide (Division of Forestry).

JOURNAL ENTRY ONE

January 30th, 2011

Today, the oak is heavy with ice and the grey sky seems to dull everything in sight. I've been trying to find an acceptable place to sit in order to reflect about the tree but the ground is still too wet, and the wind is just a little too bitter. Not much looks pretty in Wooster on days like these, it's even hard to believe things can still grow here when the sun can barely break through the clouds. Somehow, though, this tree still stands.

I work at the Art Museum, which means I must check the gallery every time I start a shift. As I slowly amble around a room I've seen a dozen times, I always stop at pieces I continually find intriguing. The first place I go is to the three hollowed logs displayed in the middle of the gallery. The logs were used as water pipes in Wooster before they were replaced with metal pipes. I enjoy this piece because it reminds me that wood was, and to an extent still is, a fundamental material of American infrastructures. From water supply systems to homes, furniture and paper, wood has been a durable cytoskeleton of society. A part of me likes this fact, because wood can be used to make so many things. Right now, for instance, I am sitting in a wooden chair, at a wooden table in the middle of a library full of wooden bookcases. I am also looking outside, at the snow swirling around the brittle branches of my White Oak. Just as its massive roots run deep into the earth, our society is also digging itself into a deeper hole of dependence on this resource. And I guess that isn't always a bad thing because **beautiful** and **useful** objects can be made with wood; it provides heat, energy, light, stability, and aesthetic value. I just hope that we don't take too much advantage of this resource and remember to keep planting seeds.

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The second place I always like to stop at in the gallery is the video of Roxy Paine's *Dendroids* series. The film documents the installation of "*conjoined defunct, and erratic*" (pictured below) in Madison Square Park, 2007. In an interview during the film, Paine claims that he isn't trying to return to some "nostalgic time before technology"; instead his work is more about provoking thoughts. In "*conjoined, defunct, and erratic*" he took great pains making sure every single branch was connected between the two trees. He claims to have made rules and had to approach the construction process systematically and mechanically. I particularly liked Paine's installation pieces because they interacted with and complimented the living trees around them. I also had a particular personal connection with his work because one of an early *dendroid* piece has been at the St. Louis Art Museum since I was a child. I often saw the huge metal tree as I walked around the museum with my dog, and I always made a point to stare at it in awe.

## JOURNAL ENTRY TWO

March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011

10:30 AM

Its Sunday morning and there is a fresh layer of ice on the ground. I was walking towards the academic Quad with my boyfriend, Stephen, and I managed to convince him to make a detour beside my tree on our way to Morgan. We walked along the backside of Andrews Library towards Timken, and I squinted at the tree in the distance through my sunglasses. Camera in hand, I realized how huge the tree was in comparison to the two libraries beside it. But I wondered if the growth of trees like these is stunted because they are surrounded by large obstructions.

This question reminded me of something Kitty Zurko said in one of her introductions to the gallery. She mentioned a scraggly old tree in the quad in front of Ebert and even pointed it out to us on the map in the exhibit. She continued saying that many years ago, there were a lot of smaller to medium sized trees in that area all the way to the Oak grove. Then, a large storm came through, and a lot of the smaller trees fell. The natural clearing allowed for the aforementioned tree to grow larger and prosper. Kitty mentioned that she identified with the tree in comparison with her older sisters, who tended to out shadow her in various ways. She admitted that once her sisters grew up and settled into their own lives, she was then able to settle into herself and mature healthily.

It really makes you wonder how much bigger these trees could get if we gave them room. I started to imagine what the roots system looked like. Was it intertwined and compacted together? Were some roots hugging a sewage pipe? Did the roots struggle to get water because the sidewalks above run it quickly off into the street? As we looked up at the tree, I was also struck by the tree's symmetrical form. The limbs of the tree seem to have sprouted out and up, almost like a flower, from the top of the trunk. It almost looked like a giant tried to yank the tree out of the ground by pulling at its limbs. I took the photo as Stephen said, "it's a pretty striking tree." "Yeah it is..." I said as I furrowed my eyebrows. "...We should walk by here more often," I resolved.

We continued to walk alongside the tree when Stephen looked at me with a slight smirk in his smile and said, "if you think about it, they are pretty much parasites, soaking up the sun before it can reach me, soaking up all the water and nutrients..."

I smiled, knowing he just liked to 'piss me off' from time to time, and retorted saying, "if only this tree could swiftly smack you in the back with its limb to get you to shut up..."

"Ha, like the whomping willow in Harry Potter?"

"Exactly" I returned. Then I wondered out loud, "I wonder what would the world be like if trees could fight back and defend themselves like people."

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When I got home, I continued to think about the notion of flora fighting fauna, and I started to think about examples of such a phenomenon in movies.

These are a couple I could think of off the top of my head:

- Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (movie came out in 2002). The Ents, “shepherds of the forest”, turned the tide of the war for Middle Earth when they joined the Free Peoples side and physically fought back. This battle, as described in the book, still remains in my memory and was therefore one of the first things I thought of when I came across this question.
- Poison Ivy from the movie, *Batman and Robin* (1997). Poison ivy is a villainous seductive scientist, who resolves to use her new powers to grow plants that can defend themselves and fight back. She also uses plant pheromones to control the men around her and is successful as getting almost anything she needs or wants.
- Harry Potter: the Whomping Willow is a giant tree on the Hogwarts Campus that aggressively protects the entrance to the Shrieking Shack. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry and Ron accidentally crash their flying car into the tree, which immediately thrashes the car around with its large limbs.

Certainly these depictions of nature fighting back are fanciful and unlikely, but they also might help us look at this through a different window. In LOTR, the Tree Ents only fight back when they realize that many of their friends [other trees] were torn down and used for the war. The trees are instigated into fighting back, and they win the battle by tearing down a damn and flooding the armory. It is a great depiction of nature versus man’s creation; war. Also, in *Batman and Robin*, Poison Ivy uses poisons and toxins natural to the earth to fight for nature, which reminds us that plants and trees **do** have ways of protecting themselves. Some are poisonous; some even trap their food, while thick bark or thorns protect others. In fact, everything around us is built to survive and has succeeded in doing so [according to Darwin]. So why does Poison Ivy fight back for them? I think that she feels the need to fight and reinforce nature with stronger defenses because thick bark and deep roots won’t stop a bulldozer. I think that the character of poison Ivy is trying to show us that nature has ways of fighting back, but it’s only dangerous when those methods of protection or destruction are exploited by humans.

JOURNAL ENTRY THREE
MAY 3rd 2011

It should be getting warm...but the air is still cold and everything is wet. Flowers and leaves have begun to bud, the grass is green, and the sun is [kind of] out.

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In April, I went to D.C. in order to get myself somewhat acquainted with my summer home. On that Saturday, I was walking around the monuments when I suddenly found myself in the middle of the Japanese Cherry Blossom Festival. I thought it was necessary that I at least take a look and find out why the whole city was spending their Saturday walking/running/sitting in traffic around a bunch of trees. As I walked past the Lincoln Memorial towards the spectacle, I wondered if the crowds around me even cared about the trees. Were they all just tourists like me? Did all of these families and couples actually find the trees beautiful like me? Among hundreds of people, under the shade of the cherry blossoms, I felt both overjoyed and annoyed. I was happy that so many people took time out of their day to admire trees, but I also wished they would all go away. At times, the experience turned into a zoo and the whole area seemed to pulse with the surging crowd. I was not only upset that I couldn't enjoy the site in silence, but I became increasingly concerned with the human impact on the trees. For example, the sign on this tree states says,

*Please do not climb or sit on this tree.*

*Cork Tree*

*(phellodendron amurense)*

*Approximately 80 years old*

*Please help this interesting tree continue to live*

*Much of the bark has been worn away by climbers and the soil around it is being worn away by foot traffic*

This sign immediately reinforced my concerns.

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Back in Wooster, I still impatiently wait to pull out my shorts and flip-flops. I like to imagine the energy and excitement that is contained in each trunk and branch on the campus. Are the trees just as restless as I am for the warmer weather? Obviously, I do not think that trees think or anticipate much of anything. But it is fun to consider.

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I've been struggling for a while now, trying to decide how to end this series of journal entries, but nothing seems to come to me. I feel as though I should say something profound, but I've never been great at expressing my thoughts or feelings...so I might as well not waste my time trying. All I know is that I will continue to look up and appreciate the trees around me.