

## History 11: Technology and the Environment in America

James C. Williams, Fall 2005, 1:30-3:10 M & W

This is an introductory U.S. history course that explores the interrelationships of people, their technology, and the environment. We'll explore these relationships in terms of the American experience from 1600 to the present. Our topic is a wide-ranging one, touching on literally every aspect of American life and culture, and it is a journey that is really quite new. There are no "textbooks" *per se* for us to rely on, so we'll be raising our own questions and finding the answers from within ourselves and our own observations as well as from reading that I have selected. I hope that, at the conclusion of the course, you have identified, analyzed, and interpreted a variety of facts, concepts, and characteristics about events, individuals, and phenomena that are significant to the interplay between people, technology, and nature in American history. I hope as well that you'll look at the world and yourself a bit differently.

Texts. You have four required texts and one for extra credit, all of which are available for purchase at the De Anza College Bookstore:

Price, Jennifer. *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

Pursell, Carroll. *American Technology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

White, Richard. *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1995.

Williams, James C. *History 11: Technology and the Environment in America*. Cupertino: De Anza College, 2001.

Additional on-line reading is found in the schedule of weekly reading (below) and is linked to the on-line version of this syllabus at <http://www.deanza.fhda.edu/faculty/williams/11.html>.

Extra credit reading:

Waldie, D. J. *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1996. (See Nov 8 & 10 below).

Additional required reading is online, with links appearing in the weekly schedule below. I also recommend you get Jules R. Benjamin, *A Student's Guide to History*, 9th ed. (2004), which has really good suggestions on studying, writing essays, taking exams, and doing research. Finally, I recommend that you check out the useful history websites page on my web site <http://www.deanza.fhda.edu/faculty/williams/historylinks.html>.

Classroom Requirements. Please know that I abide by the Standards of Student

Conduct set forth in the college catalog, and I expect everyone in class to act with consideration and respect for each other. Any absences will be observed and noted, and unexcused absences will negatively affect your grade; this is a discussion class, so if you're not here it will make a big difference.

Grading. Your course grade will be based on letter grades assigned to short essays, a final exam, and class participation. [Four essay topics will be assigned during the quarter.](#) You must do the first one (20% of your course grade), and two of the remaining three essays (20% each), plus the final exam 25% of your course grade). As you read, you should jot down questions about the reading and bring them to class for discussion; class participation counts 15%. If you miss one of the three required essays or the final, you will receive a final course grade of “D”, regardless of the grades on your other work. Miss more than one requirement, and you'll receive an “F”.

Instructor Office Hours. By appointment. My email address is : [techjunc@pacbell.net](mailto:techjunc@pacbell.net).

## Schedule of Weekly Reading, Discussion Topics, and Assignments

### Sep 19 & 21 - Introduction.

Read the Introduction in *Flight Maps*. What is nature? What does nature mean to you? Read the *Introduction to American Technology*. What is technology? What does technology mean to you? Read Ch. 1 of “The Technology Junction” in *Technology and the Environment*. How are technology, nature, and people related to one another? Also, read Ted Steinberg's excellent recent essay, "Down to Earth: Nature, Agency, and Power in History," *American Historical Review* (June 2002). This powerful essay argues that historians generally put nature in the background of history, rarely recognizing how powerful nature is in human affairs. The essay and a brief accompanying online discussion is at <http://www.deanza.fhda.edu/faculty/williams/steinberg.html>. **Please make a real effort to complete this reading by Wednesday. Notes on this reading are due on Wednesday, Sep 21. Notes on the week's reading hereafter are due at the Monday class session for that week. This means you'll have to be one week ahead on reading throughout the quarter.**

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### Sep 26 & 28 - Native America.

Read Ch. 2 of “The Technology Junction” in *Technology and the Environment*; read the Introduction and Ch. 1 in *The Organic Machine*. (Remember the notes for this week's reading are due the first class meeting, Monday, Sep 26) How do we explain the relationship of Native Americans to nature? In what fundamental ways is it the same and different than our own relationship to nature? How do you think Richard White answer these questions? **Remember, reading notes on Monday the 27th.**

**Essay topic** assigned Wednesday, Sep 28; **essay due** Wednesday, Oct 5.

### Oct 3 & 5 - Early America's ecological revolution.

Review Ch. 1 and read Ch. 3 of “The Technology Junction” in *Technology and the Environment*, and read Ch. 1 in *American Technology*. How did technology

shape people's relationship with nature in early America? How did the relationship change? What's behind those changes? What can we learn about ourselves from these changes? □

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**Oct 10 & 12 - "Capitalist ecological revolution" and mechanistic perception of nonhuman nature.**

Read Ch. 4 in "The Technology Junction" in *Technology and the Environment*, keeping in mind Ch. 1; and read Ch. 2 in *American Technology* and Ch. 1 in *Flight Maps*. What are the characteristics of America's industrial revolution? What sorts of changes did it bring to the interplay between people and nature? How is the concept of "second nature" useful here? What light does Steinberg's essay on dams in New England shed on the roles of technology and nature and people in their interrelationship? What light does the story of the Passenger Pigeon throw on the interrelationship?

**Oct 17 & 19 - Work and nature in capitalistic society.**

Read Chs. 3 and 6 in *American Technology* and Ch. 2 in *The Organic Machine*. In class we'll discuss technology, production, labor, and rationalization of nature. Just what comprises the idea of "the workplace as an ecological system?" What is the role of nature in the workplace? Is nature the ultimate commodity? Is there such a thing as authoritarian technology? What might be McEvoy's, Kleinegger's and White's take on this?

[Essay topic](#) assigned Oct 19; **essay due** Oct 26.

**Oct 24 & 26 - Gender, technology, and nature.**

Read Ch. 4 and review Ch. 6 in *American Technology*; and read Ch. 2 in *Flight Maps*. These essays address the issue of gender, technology, and nature from three perspectives. What sorts of questions and issues does each essay raise about the relationships of people, technology, and nature? What is the role of gender in technological choice and decision making? What is the role of technology as a junction for the relationship between humans and humans-as-nature?

**Oct 31 & Nov 2 - Are animals technology?**

Read Ed Russell's "Anatomy of Organismal Technology," which is found at [http://www.deanza.fhda.edu/faculty/williams/Anatomy\\_of\\_Organismal\\_Technology.html](http://www.deanza.fhda.edu/faculty/williams/Anatomy_of_Organismal_Technology.html), and then read the two part discussion "Animals as technology" (Word or PDF version) and "More animals as technology" (Word version only), which are found on the Envirotech web site <http://www.udel.edu/History/gpetrick/envirotech/Discussions.htm#Discussions>. □The discussion stretched over several days, and involved historians from all over the country as well as the U.K., Europe, and Australia. □As you read, compile a list of the topics and issues that are raised and bring it to class for discussion. □What sorts of questions and issues are raised about the

relationship of people to animals, technology and animals, and technology and nature?

**Essay topic** assigned Nov 2; **essay due** Nov 9.

**Nov 7 & 9 - The urban and suburban world.**

Read "Faulty Construction" in *Technology and the Environment*, Ch. 3 in *Flight Maps*. □ Does urban and suburban life have its own ecology?... does modern rural life? How is conservation a response to urban-industrialism? How is the culture of prevention a response? How is the pink flamingo a response? How would you describe the human/nature relationship as it exists in the modern urban and suburban world? □ Is the role of technology in this relationship the same or different than in earlier epochs?

□□□□ Toxic waste is a real problem in our urban and suburban world. □ For a local example of this problem, one that has a very long history, look at [how mercury has poisoned San Francisco Bay](#).

□□□□ **For extra credit you may read Waldie's *Holy Land* and write a three to four page review of this book in which you focus on how he illuminates the idea of the technology junction in the suburban world.**

**Nov 14 & 16 - Reinventing Nature for Consumers.**

Read Chs. 4 and 5 in *Flight Maps*. Consider Price's "adventure with nature in modern America" in terms of how automobiles, air conditioning, shopping malls, landscape planning, and consumerism. How have these things altered our relationship with nature? How has the human/nature relationship changed in terms of the food we eat, in terms of our technological relationship with our own bodies? What is the significance of places like Disney World, Las Vegas, Norwegian Cruise Lines, and Great America in connection with this topic?

**Essay topic** assigned Nov 16; **essay due** Nov 22.

**Nov 20 & 22 - Landscapes of Power.**

Review pp. 48-58 and read Ch. 3 in *The Organic Machine*; read Chs. 7 and Ch. 9 in *American Technology*. Define what might be meant by "landscapes of power." □ How does the idea of "landscapes of power" connect to Emerson's marriage of the machine and nature? □ How is the idea of "second nature" linked to that of an "organic machine?" □ Are energy landscapes arenas in which humans play out their relationship to nature? □ What is the significance of having "selling" nuclear power to Americans in terms of the human/nature relationship and consumerism? □ What does the concept of appropriate technology add to understanding the human/nature relationship?

**Nov 28 & Nov 30 - Catch up, review and final discussions.**

This week we'll catch up, review key ideas we've discussed during the quarter, and generally try to reach some conclusions about what we've read and discussed. □

**Final exam essay topic** assigned Nov 30.

**Final exam essay due *not later* than 12:00 noon, Wednesday, Dec 7.**

Finally ... I realize that this course requires a great deal of effort. I hope you'll take solace in the words of Jimmy Dugan (Tom Hanks's character in the movie *A League of Their Own*). Responding to the resignation of his star baseball player because "it just got too hard," he said: "It's SUPPOSED to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everybody would do it. The 'hard' makes it great!"