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STS.036 Technology and Nature in American History  
Spring 2008

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**STS.036**  
**Spring 2008**  
**Paper #2**

Length: 5-7 pages (double-spaced, 12-point font)  
Value: 25% of final grade

Topic

This assignment is a comparative analytical essay that asks you to compare and contrast the commodification of nature through early-nineteenth-century New England with the commodification of nature in the Great West in the nineteenth century. (Remember that the “Great West” is a nineteenth-century term that refers to the interior region of the country, all the way from the Ohio River west to the Pacific Ocean.) This assignment is designed to give you a chance to synthesize the material from the first half of the course into your own original argument.

Requirements

Your paper must be analytical in nature, which means all of the following:

1. Your paper must begin with a thesis or main idea that is clearly and strongly stated somewhere in your introduction. (“New England and the Great West experienced the commodification of nature in ways that were both similar and different” is a not a good thesis statement. Your thesis should make a specific claim about how and why the process of commodifying nature changed over time and place. What factor or factors, in your mind, can best account for how nature was commodified differently in New England and the West? Your introduction should explain **how** the commodification of nature looked different in these two contexts; your thesis should explain **why** the process was different.)
2. The body of the paper should develop your thesis through a coherent paragraph structure driven by strong topic sentences.
3. Your assertions must be supported with evidence drawn from the course readings, lectures, and discussions.
4. All references to the course readings—whether direct quotations or paraphrases—must be cited according to conventions in the *Chicago Manual of Style*. You are not required to consult any sources other than the course readings, so most likely you will be footnoting only books<sup>1</sup> and possibly articles,<sup>2</sup> both of which have a very simple citation format.

For questions about how, when, and why to cite sources, consult MIT’s Academic Integrity handbook, available online:  
<http://web.mit.edu/academicintegrity/>

If you are not sure whether to cite a source at a particular point in your paper, please ask! In general, a safe bet is to err on the side of caution and include the footnote. Too many footnotes aren’t a problem; too few footnotes can become a very serious problem!

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<sup>1</sup> William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 120.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Marx, “Technology: The Emergence of a Hazardous Concept,” *Social Research* 64, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 965.

## Helpful hints

- You should know exactly what your argument is going to be and how you are going to develop and substantiate it before you start typing! (Try the roommate test: if you can't say the main idea of your paper in a clear sentence to your roommate or someone who doesn't know anything about the topic, then you are not ready to begin writing.) Your thesis statement may come to you instantly in a flash of inspiration, or—more likely—you will have to do some preliminary note-taking, perhaps writing (akin to a response paper or freewrite), and perhaps talking through your ideas before you arrive at a thesis.
- Take some time to look back over the readings and your notes as you are thinking about how to formulate your thesis. Which materials should you focus on? I would expect to see the following readings and details from lectures and films somewhere in your essay:
  - Cronon, *Changes in the Land*
  - Steinberg, *Nature Incorporated*
  - Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*
  - Lowell textile industry
  - Railroads (transcontinental and otherwise)
  - The “blueprint of modern America”:
    - Homestead Act (May 1862)
    - Pacific Railroad Act (July 1862)
    - Morrill Land Grant Act (July 1862)

(Of course you are free to include other readings and details as well.)

- Remember that all the supporting evidence you use—quotations, paraphrases, examples, specific historical details—should be in the service of your own argument. It is important to demonstrate your knowledge of the material, but you shouldn't allow the readings to take over your essay. (And definitely avoid merely summarizing the reading or stringing together extended quotations!) Your voice should be the primary one making the argument; bring in Cronon, Steinberg, and others as secondary voices to support your assertions.
- How should you organize your paper? Sometimes it is tempting in a comparative essay to say everything you want to say about apples and then say everything you want to say about oranges. Or, in your case, first New England and then the Great West. But using that kind of structure will jumble your points of comparison all together. By the time you get to your third major point about the Great West, your reader will have to remember all the way back to your New England section to draw a comparison. A better way to organize a paper like this is to adopt a point-by-point structure in which each subtopic relates back to your thesis:
  - Subtopic #1
    - New England
    - Great West
  - Subtopic #2
    - New England
    - Great West
  - And so on...

- To figure out whether your paragraph structure works, try cutting and pasting all your topic sentences into a separate document, compressing them into one paragraph. Then read that paragraph. If the logic follows from sentence to sentence without any gaps, then you have a cohesive paragraph structure (and probably a very good argument).
- Finally, the best way to proofread is to read your paper aloud, slowly and carefully, as though you were delivering a speech. Again a roommate or unsuspecting friend can come in handy.