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STS.036 Technology and Nature in American History  
Spring 2008

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## STS.036

### Reading questions for White, *The Organic Machine*

#### Introduction

- What is White's argument? What does he mean by an "organic machine"? What does he mean when he says he wants a history based on relationships? (ix-x)
- What, according to White, are the failures of modern environmentalism? (x) How does White's critique compare to Cronon's in "The Trouble with Wilderness"?
- Why does White say we should focus more on Emerson and Mumford and less on Thoreau and Muir? (xi)

#### Chapter 1

- What does White mean when he says that "passage along the river was . . . not just physical; it was social and political"? (14)
- What is the difference between energy and power? (14)

#### Chapter 2

- How do Kipling's and Emerson's perceptions of the Columbia River differ? (32-35)
- How did steamboats, railroads, and canneries make human labor invisible and more visible at the same time? (38)
- What is the tragedy of the commons? How does it pertain to the Columbia? (39)
- Why does White call the effects of the early-twentieth-century salmon hatcheries "Frankensteinian"? (47)
- What effect did World War I have on the nation's energy system? (50-51)
- What is the difference between Superpower and Giant Power? (51-53)
- Why did dam projects move forward in the 1930s if they had no economic rationale? (54-56)
- How did dam proponents understand the relationship between dams and nature? (57)

#### Chapter 3

- According to White, why and how have human relationships to the Columbia River been a failure? Why is it so important to White to "get our metaphors right"? (59-63)
- How did dams and the Bonneville Power Project turn the Columbia into what White calls "an ideological battleground"? (65)
- What does this chapter's history of power projects and government oversight reveal?
- What does White give Lewis Mumford credit for understanding? (67-69) Why are Mumford's insights so crucial to White's chapter and his overall argument?
- What is White's assessment of the New Deal as it pertained to the Columbia?
- How did the aluminum industry "hijack" the river in the post-WWII era? (72-74)
- What were the lessons of the flood of 1948? (74-75)
- According to White, why and how does Hanford blur the distinctions between opposites, between natural and unnatural? (83-87) How can Hanford both "represent a transcendence of nature" and "only complicate natural systems"? (88)

#### Chapter 4

- How does the cultural value of salmon compare to its economic value? (90-91)
- What does fish management really entail, in White's view? (97)
- What do you make of White's characterization of Native Americans as the "designated conservationists" of salmon? (99)
- How did dams affect Native Americans' attempts to preserve their access to their traditional fishing places? (99-100)
- How does White characterize the role of science been in the history of the Columbia? (106)
- What are some of the appeals and the ironies of the virtual rivers? (106-107)
- Why does White say that the views of Emerson and Mumford were in some ways prophetic? (108) Why does White focus so much on Emerson and Mumford throughout?
- Why does White say that a strict preservationist approach to the Columbia is missing the point? (109)
- According to White, what is the principal lesson of the Columbia? (109)
- What are the consequences of taking apart the Columbia? (110)
- Why does White say that humans have done much more than merely commodify the river? What is a better way to characterize the transformation of the Columbia? (110-111)
- How does White use the analytic category of labor to conclude his book? (112-113)