

The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River (Hill and Wang Critical Issues)

By Richard White

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In this pioneering study, White explores the relationship between the natural history of the Columbia River and the human history of the Pacific Northwest for both whites and Native Americans. He concentrates on what brings humans and the river together: not only the physical space of the region but also, and primarily, energy and work. For working with the river has been central to Pacific Northwesterners' competing ways of life. It is in this way that White comes to view the Columbia River as an organic machine--with conflicting human and natural claims--and to show that whatever separation exists between humans and nature exists to be crossed.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Award-winning author White (history, Univ. of Washington) offers a powerful and exploratory look into the relationship between people and nature in the Pacific Northwest. The result is an alarming vision of the history of life along the Columbia River. By examining both Indian and white interactions, the author molds a new environmentalism that incorporates pollution, inorganic naturalness, and environmental destruction, as well as a certain energy and mysticism. The relationship between the Columbia River and the people in its sweep can be symbolized by the "organic machine." According to White, this machine incorporates all living creatures in the environment, each with a "social claim to their part of the machine." White approaches the conflict between humanity and nature earlier noted by minds such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Lewis Mumford with passion, optimism, emotion, and intelligence, connecting the reader on a variety of levels. Recommended for most libraries.

Vicki L. Toy Smith, Univ. of Nevada, Reno

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From [Booklist](#)

Prizewinning University of Washington historian White's "organic machine" is the Columbia River and its tributaries: along this energy powerhouse, Native American fishermen and eastern adventurers, spawning salmon and man-made machines--from gill nets and fish wheels to hydroelectric dams and Hanford Engineer Works--came together to forge "a new energy regime, a new geography, and a new relationship between human labor and the energy of nature." Viewing human history and natural history as part of the same narrative, not as parallel stories, White argues "it is our work that ultimately links us, for better or worse, to nature." *The Organic Machine* focuses on that linkage to illuminate both the conflicting human claims and constructions that have "disassembled" the mighty river over the decades and the "larger organic cycles beyond [human] control" to which the river system remains tied. White urges that it is this mixture of organic and human-made that defines both the river's history and its current reality. Includes a bibliographical essay but no footnotes; an annotated version is in the University of Washington Library's Special Collections. *Mary Carroll*

Review

"Visionary . . . White has posed a brilliant new model for environmental history."--Howard R. Lamar, Yale University

"A crystalline gem of a book. White makes the transformation of the Columbia River basin into a compelling microhistory of the encounter between the forces of technology and nature in America."--Leo Marx, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

"White has done something remarkable: he has shown us a way of thinking that connects our deep history to the present and sees our most essential human habits--work, in this case--as inseparable from the places we inhabit."--Elliott West, University of Arkansas

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sally Watts:

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