

Things to think about: Richard White, The Organic Machine

In the introduction he distances himself from environmentalists because he says that they distance people from nature, while he wants to bring them closer (which he proposes to do by stressing that both the Columbia River and people work). (x) What do you think of this?

Why does he suggest on p. 57 that his goal is "to understand rather than to denounce"?

What is the significance of the Columbia River in White's view? What does he mean when he says that it is created by people?

How does he connect the physical and geological description of the river with an analysis of human society on pp 12-13?

What does he mean by saying that "passage along the river was not just physical, it was social and political"? (14)

Why does he talk so much about language, metaphor, and rhetoric?

The native American presence in the northwest has been more consistent and persistent than in many other parts of the US. What part do they play in White's story? Does he make a significant distinction between them and European derived humans? What difference did the advent of white traders and settlers make to the previous occupants of the river ecosystem? What does White mean when he says that "all the elements of the energy system remained intact, but the relation was altered"? (27)

How does White use (contrast) Kipling and Emerson (32-35)?

How was the river organized according to race, gender, and class? (39)

On p. 59-63 he rejects two metaphors for human impact on the Columbia--killing and raping--and suggests that a failed marriage would be better. Do you agree with him? Why is it so important to provide an accurate metaphor, as well as to criticize inaccurate ones?

How would you describe the ideal of technoplanners--"a fully rationalized river, an organic machine"? (64) What would it look like? Do you think it is an attainable ideal? A good one? Where would such an ideal come from (that is, what would make it seem desirable)?

Is the tone of White's description of the failed nuclear reactors on the Columbia (79-80) different than the tone of his description of earlier technological projects that didn't succeed as planned, or at all?

Why does White value the salmon so highly? What does it mean to him? Does it mean the same for him as it has done to white and Indian fishers?

Why does he present it as a criticism that the Columbia no longer produces wild salmon, but instead produces carp and shad? Why do you think that the "managers" of the Columbia cart young salmon around in trucks and barges?

What does White mean in the last section of the book (108-112) where he argues that there is no line between nature and culture, between people and the river?

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