

Clean And White: A History Of Environmental Racism In The United States

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Review

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Zimring, Carl A. *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States*. New York University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9781479826940

A Long View of Environmental Racism in the United States

From the nation's founding in the eighteenth century to the present, white stereotypes of black bodies as dirty and diseased have formed the ideological basis for all manner of racist policies and practices—from jobs to housing to public accommodations and more. Thus argues Carl A. Zimring in *Clean and White*, a sweeping cultural history of environmental racism in America. Zimring uses the “lens of dirt” (3) to explore the origins and evolution of racist thought and constructions of whiteness in America, and to make the case that environmental factors have played an instrumental role in shaping ideas about race.

This book joins a growing body of scholarship on the history of environmental racism, which includes important works by Andrew Hurley, Julie Sze, Ellen Griffith Spears, Dorceta E. Taylor, and Robert Bullard, among others. But unlike previous works, which have tended to adopt a case study approach and focused mainly on pollution and public health, Zimring's book spans the 240-plus years of American history and explores how white people (and people aspiring to become white) came to see black people as a source (rather than a victim) of environmental pollution, and how those racist beliefs became self-fulfilling through discriminatory policies and practices that forced African Americans to live and work in dirty and disease-prone environments.

Zimring locates the origins of environmental racism in the age of Enlightenment. He contrasts Thomas Jefferson's idealization of agrarian life with his disparagement of industrializing cities. An emergent discourse linking hygiene to morality, Zimring argues, became the language through which white Americans formulated ideas about racial difference. Fears of disease and of black people, he argues, grew more pronounced in the immediate aftermath of

the Civil War, a conflict in which disease claimed far more victims on both sides than the battlefield. White Americans came to view social disorder as equivalent to an infectious disease, one which freedmen and women carried and spread. As Zimring puts it, “American concerns about race in the years after the Civil War became enmeshed with ever-growing concerns about waste” (47).

These fears about race and waste, and the threat persons of color posed to the health of the nation, only grew more pronounced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as cities struggled to address the unsanitary conditions that high-density populations and polluting industries produced. The Progressive reforms that emerged, Zimring argues, further linked cleanliness to whiteness, and made racial purity a standard by which European immigrants strove to attain. The notion that white people were cleaner and purer than persons of color, he argues, made whiteness the ideal European immigrants aspired to and made blackness the contrast by which they gauged their assimilation into American culture. It served to stigmatize persons of color and justify their relegation to dirty jobs and disease-prone areas of cities. The pervasiveness of this racialized discourse on cleanliness and filth becomes most evident in early to mid-twentieth century advertising, which deployed racist imagery to sell soap and other cleaning products.

African American leaders at the time could not escape the pervasive association of black bodies with dirt and disease. This, Zimring argues, explains the obsession of black educational institutions such as Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute with teaching students proper cleaning and personal grooming habits. The stakes were, by Zimring’s account, high. These stereotypes formed the basis for discriminatory practices in labor and housing markets. “The racial construction of waste,” Zimring argues, “informed what work particular Americans performed, where particular Americans lived, and the proximity of waste materials to those work and residential patterns” (106).

Perhaps. The main problem with Zimring’s book is that it too often confuses correlation with causation, and assumes that racist ideas about black bodies as dirty and diseased formed the basis for discriminatory hiring practices and segregated housing markets, as opposed to simply providing a rationale for policies and practices that were fundamentally rooted in material interests. At times the book reads like two parallel histories—one of anti-black racist ideologies, the other of the struggle to manage urban waste and mitigate the spread of infectious disease—that are only tangentially related. Too often, the

author fails to convincingly demonstrate the relation between the two.

That said, the book does provide a wealth of insights into racist ideological formation and its deleterious effects on African Americans' lives and struggle for equality. This comes through most powerfully in the book's final chapter, on the Memphis sanitation workers' strike that brought Martin Luther King to the city in the spring of 1968. What began as strike for better pay and improved working conditions, Zimring shows, grew into a larger struggle for the dignity of labor and the rights of all workers to be treated with respect, as captured by the signs marching strikers carried that read: "I AM A MAN." While the Memphis sanitation strike will always be remembered as King's final campaign, it also, Zimring argues, established "an important precedent for the ways in which environmental racism would be addressed" in the decades that followed (212). In the book's final pages, Zimring summarizes the key issues and pivotal moments that have shaped the modern movement for environmental justice, and points the way for future scholars to begin the work of documenting and giving voice to the civil rights struggles of our time.

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