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Book Review: Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States

William W. McClanahan

University of Essex, wmmcl@essex.ac.uk

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Zimring, Carl A. (2016). *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States*. New York, New York: NYU Press. 275 pages, \$35.

'If white skin was clean skin, then white skin was also healthy skin. If, however, black skin was dirty skin, what was the connection between black-skinned people and disease?' (p. 98). In answering this essential historical question, Carl A. Zimring's *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in The United States* convincingly locates the roots of contemporary environmental racism in the seemingly progressive public health and sanitation movements in early American history. The intersections of race, racism, and environment are, perhaps increasingly, evident to anyone who cares to look. In a contemporary world that has seen growing tensions at the intersections of race, ecology, and environmental harm—e.g. the opposition from indigenous groups and others to the construction of new gas pipelines in North Dakota, or the apparent willingness of civic managers in Flint, Michigan to allow devastating levels of lead pollution in a municipal water system that serves a predominately black and poor population—there is, it seems, a substantial need for sustained scholarly attention to the historical roots of these intersections. In *Clean and White*, Zimring offers just such a comprehensive historical overview of the intersections of race and environment in America. Beginning with an exploration of Thomas Jefferson's personal and public views on race and the race problem in America, Zimring methodically makes the case—through an exhaustive cataloging of the significant moments in the social construction of a racialized environment—that racial identities in America have long been inextricably tied to popular cultural notions of hygiene, cleanliness, disease and health, and waste. In the second half of the book, Zimring offers a historically informed account of the roots of contemporary environmental burdens and inequalities faced by nonwhite people in America. Throughout, Zimring's approach to the topic is comprehensive and rich with historical detail, although it at times feels lacking in theoretical or analytical edge and insight.

The book, though, is primarily just what its title promises—a history. While scholars in other disciplines might find Zimring's seeming reluctance to provide theoretical, political, or analytical insight indicative of a deficiency in capital-h History, the book nevertheless offers a wealth of information and insight that other scholars approaching the problems of environmental racism from various disciplinary foundations should find invaluable. Among the book's strongest contributions is its attention to the cultural and discursive construction of nonwhite people as inferior to whites based on what Zimring characterizes as 'racist common sense' of the day 'conflating dark skin color with dirt' and, therefore, with the disease, miasma, and urban decay of the early-mid nineteenth century.

Describing Jefferson's own attitudes on race, Zimring notes that the author of the US constitution favored the 'rural idyll' of Virginia over the urban cores of Europe and the emerging American northeast. In Zimring's account, the early American environmental ideals favored by Jefferson contained some dimensions

of racialized notions of innate cleanliness or filth, but that those ideas were bereft of the kind of pseudoscientific reasoning and rationalization that would emerge later. While the book's detailed descriptions of these Jeffersonian moments of early environmental racism are compelling and useful, it is the latter sections—particularly those engaging with more contemporarily tangible moments and examples of environmental racism—that seem to provide more useful insights.

Zimring notes that the construction of white identity—an identity that not only affords the benefits of white supremacy, but that is also malleable and fluid enough to allow for those benefits to be extended to other ethnic groups that favorably assimilate into white American culture—was historically reliant on the parallel construction of 'whiteness' as clean, pure, and 'healthy'. Indeed, this is a peculiar cultural phenomenon that appears to persist, and Zimring's exhaustive historical accounting is of exceptional use in locating and apprehending the moments of the construction's instantiation. Furthermore, Zimring offers some tools necessary for scholarly intervention in those moments of contemporary cultural discourse that repeat, reify and reconstitute those tropes; by providing significant and convincing evidence, drawn from the historical record, that the roots of environmental racism are located in the racist pseudoscience of a rotating cast of characters and actors across politics, academia, and public intellectualism, *Clean and White* makes clear to the reader that the various fictions of white skin as purity and black skin as pollution and pollutant are just that.

Several moments of Zimring's account will be, sadly, unsurprising to any reader who has considered the various mythologies of racial purity that have historically captivated American discourse. To provide but one example of the persistence of these mythologies, Zimring describes the ways that interracial marriage antagonized white supremacists and supremacy with the threat of 'sexual pollution'. Fears of pollution, of course, rely initially on mythologies of purity—here the purity of the white race, or perhaps more particularly of white womanhood—which themselves have strong ties not only to racial discourses, but also environmental and ecological discourses. Here, Zimring deftly links notions of racial and environmental purity, environmental exploitability, and cultural fear of genetic pollution to various moments of racial oppression in American history. Because Zimring so convincingly ties environment and ecology with the construction of race through color, those interested in emerging frameworks of contemporary ecocriticism such as 'prismatic ecology' (Cohen 2013) would likely find *Clean and White* useful, as it lays bare many of the historical assumptions that continue to underpin cultural conceptualizations of the meaning(s) of environment and color (whether or not 'color' is conceptualized strictly as it relates to racialized categorical definitions).

Clean and White would also prove exceptionally useful on the bookshelf of any green criminologist or environmental sociologist interested in environmental justice. Because green criminology—a loose configuration of theoretical and methodological frameworks that explore the intersections of environment, harm, and crime from a criminological perspective—finds its roots in (among other seminal work) Lynch's 1990 call for criminological attention to environmental

issues, and because Lynch found the impetus for his call in the environmental justice frameworks offered by Robert Bullard (see generally: Bullard 1993, 1983) and others, environmental racism and the various ways it is made real in the material and quotidian is—or should be—of great significance to green criminologists.

If there is any key weakness in *Clean and White*, it is that it lingers on early American history without providing a satisfying account of environmental racism post 1970. The book at times seems to be addressing two distinct issues and histories. One is the phenomenon of environmental racism that we would commonly see in the siting of waste management facilities in nonwhite neighborhoods, for instance, or in the destruction of ecologies inhabited primarily by nonwhite people such as the lead-polluted military testing ground of Vieques, Puerto Rico (Davis et al., 2007) or the western reservations of Native Americans, polluted by the racialized dumping of nuclear waste (Brook 1998). The other, a compelling bit of history in its own right, and one that certainly has contemporary reverberations, is the discursive and cultural conflation of blackness with disease and pollution and whiteness with health and purity. This admittedly minor criticism—that Zimring at times addresses the racialized construction of hygiene, and at times addresses the uneven environmental burdens that nonwhite communities face historically—highlights what some might find a more significant deficit in *Clean and White*: it takes a decidedly non-intersectional approach, in that gender, sexuality, and class are not given adequate or individual attention. Class, in fact, which regularly appears in research as a determining factor in environmental health, is notably absent from *Clean and White* as a site of analysis. Nevertheless, Zimring provides a well-researched, compelling, and engaging history of environmental racism, and it stands unquestionably as a book that can offer a much-needed historical weight to contemporary scholarly debates and explorations of race and environment across disciplines.

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