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# Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism And The Search For Justice In A Southern Town



## Synopsis

Association for Humanist Sociology 2007 Book Award co-winner  
Julian Steward Award 2006 Runner-Up!  
Over the past two decades, environmental racism has become the rallying cry for many communities as they discover the contaminations of toxic chemicals and industrial waste in their own backyards. Living next door to factories and industrial sites for years, the people in these communities often have record health problems and debilitating medical conditions. Melissa Checker tells the story of one such neighborhood, Hyde Park, in Augusta, Georgia, and the tenacious activism of its two hundred African American families. This community, at one time surrounded by nine polluting industries, is struggling to make their voices heard and their community safe again. *Polluted Promises* shows that even in the post-civil rights era, race and class are still key factors in determining the politics of pollution.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Melissa Checker’s absorbing story is a portrait of America. *Polluted Promises* showcases the complex links between toxic waste and race, and the hope-filled journeys of environmental activists who are wise, strong, and spiritual in their fight against toxic waste—and for their lives. Checker is doing public anthropology for social justice.” —Carol Stack, author of *All Our Kin*  
“A very rich, organized, and theoretically interesting ethnographic case study of environmental activism. Checker beautifully recounts how the issues of race emerged and were

manipulated in social organizing against environmental poisoning. —George E.

Marcus, author of *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* —“Polluted Promises is a substantial accomplishment. It grounds the notion of environmental justice wonderfully in practical terms, in the theoretically sophisticated and empathetic examination of Hyde Park. —Adolph Reed, Jr., author of *Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* —“In this highly readable account . . . Checker has written a fine book. Assigned to students interested in urbanism, science and technology studies, race relations in the United States, environment, or social movements, the book is sure to spark thoughtful conversation. —American Anthropologist —“I hope that (this book) doesn’t get pigeonholed as a dry, academic treatise, because it is anything but that. It is a wonderfully written account of the struggles by the residents of Hyde Park, a neighborhood in Augusta, Georgia, to undo decades of...environmental racism. —In Brief

Melissa Checker teaches in the Department of Urban Studies, Queens College/CUNY. She is co-editor of *Local Actions: Cultural Activism, Power, and Public Life*. She is donating all of her proceeds from this book to the Hyde and Aragon Park Improvement Committee.

I bought this book because it was on a required reading list for a cultural anthropology "American Communities" class. I normally resell my textbooks after the semester ends, but I have this one prominently stored in my library for quick reference and re-reading. I found the book fascinating as it detailed the hardships one community endured as a result of chemical dumping. The large company attitude and politics of corporate waste neglect are exposed in this book as shameful and uncaring. I found the bond between neighbors and their enduring fight to save their community encouraging. I hope to think that environmental and social racism has diminished since the time of the Hyde Park injustices. No matter what socio-economic status individuals and neighborhoods have, we are bound together by our common goals, needs and rights. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about the struggles and challenges that face neighborhoods across this great nation every day.

I read this book and was curious about the long-term outcome. In early 2014, I visited the neighborhood and was shocked because it looked like an abandoned war zone. I found out the entire neighborhood had been seized by the City of Augusta under eminent domain. The city paid to move the residents to other neighborhoods and was planning to demolish the old homes. When I

visited, many of the homes had been vacant for months or possibly years (based on the condition), so some had been vandalized or partly destroyed already. Most of the residents offered no resistance to leaving and were happy to move elsewhere after decades of seeking justice.

The Book was slightly used with underlining and highlighting in it. It was what I expected. Good deal.

## Book

This is a book that will make you angry when reading about the racial injustice. I was assigned the book for a class and was glad I read it.

"Polluted Promises" is exactly what Hyde Park residents received. The first inhabitants of the neighborhood saw this as a place to live the "America Dream". Sadly, that dream turned into a nightmare when the industrial neighbors moved in. As Arthur Smith stated, "Hyde Park's tracks aren't going to stop toxic chemicals. They're going to sneak up and bite you too." (189) "Polluted Promises" serves as an example of what happens when a community struggles against discrimination and oppression. Checkers was able to volunteer and work in the Hyde Park community for fourteen months. She was able to gain their trust and provide extensive knowledge of their struggles and success as an organization and community. The residents of Hyde Park had valid reasons to suspect that the contamination in their community was based on their race. Checker's main purpose of writing this book was to explore the concept of environmental racism. Was this the cause for the contamination in Hyde Park? In the 1950's when the first residents moved into Hyde Park, it was beautiful. They viewed Hyde Park as their gateway to the all American dream. They were able to live out this dream for many years even as their unsightly neighbors moved in. To them, it was all apart of city life. However when the reports of contamination came out, people were shocked and outraged. What caused this, and why their community? This is what led them to assume that environmental racism was the cause. It could be said that this was a class issue. That may also have been a factor but it is not the main factor. The residents of Virginia subdivision, a majority white neighborhood, filed and won a lawsuit against SWP in the 1970's. Not one Hyde Park resident was asked to join even though they were only a few miles away. Environmental racism has not only occurred in Hyde Park. R.I.S.E vs. Kay is a court case in which African Americans fought to prevent another landfill from being placed in their community. Three

landfills had been placed in this community and they were fighting to prevent a fourth one from opening. However, they lost their case because the court said that they could not prove discrimination, although only fifty percent of the residents in this county were black and no landfills were elsewhere in the county. Hyde Park had no say in what industries that they would allow in the community. There were never any public meetings held for them to agree or disagree with the choices the county made. When blacks were allowed in the commission, there was no one to represent Hyde Park. Checkers went on to say that although residents knew their issue was based on race, they were able to collaborate with other communities who were interested in environmental justice in order to bring attention to their own plight. Over the past two decades, environmental racism has become the concern for many communities as they discover the contaminations of toxic chemicals and industrial waste in their own neighborhoods. Living next door to factories and industrial sites for years, the people in these districts often have a record of health problems and devastating medical conditions. Melissa Checker's work in Hyde Park has provided us with a clear understanding of how environmental racism hinders a community. An underlying message in the book would be that grassroots movements can organize and become successful. Although Hyde Park has not won the sought-after prize of relocation, the HAPIC has been a very successful organization. This organization was started in the 1960's because they wanted infrastructure like other neighborhoods and has continued to work actively to enhance their neighborhood. Checkers mentions that even when they received infrastructure the group did not disintegrate. The group continued to work towards a better quality of life. HAPIC wanted to apply for the Brownfields Project but the city did not think Hyde Park would receive it. They did. Government tends to have little faith that these organizations will succeed. Religion tends to be the backbone of these organizations, thus giving them strength and unity. On the other hand, their religion can be their downfall. Religion is not accepted in the professional world as it is in the communities these organizations stem from. Whether struggling to understand "technospeak" or fighting for justice, HAPIC and organizations like it are vital to our country's continued fight for justice.

Great book and great product. Needed this book for one of my college courses. Definitely an interesting book. I would recommend reading it.

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