Hyde Park in Augusta, Georgia is presented as an interesting case study in environmental racism and social justice by Melissa Checker. Polluted Promises is an ethnographic study of the residents of Hyde Park, how they got there, and why the remain there. Checker does a great job at providing an historical overview of African-American history in the south, and Georgia in particular. This background information is vital to the purpose of the book as it supports Checker's claim of institutional racism as being the determining factor of the environmental injustice that Hyde Park residents face.

Checker, a self-described activist ethnographer (p. 8), immersed herself within the Hyde and Aragon Park Improvement Committee (HAPIC) to bring their historical, political, and racial struggles (although oftentimes inseparable) to light. Polluted Promises is an account of how poor African-Americans in the swampland surrounding Augusta, fought (and are still fighting) environmental injustices.

Neither Checker nor HAPIC activists see their plight as anything other than racism. It is by no mistake or a use of yesterday's terminology that the title of the book includes Environmental Racism. Polluted Promises is about the “disproportionate siting of hazardous waste facilities in communities of color” (p. 14). Checker affirms Di Chiro's (1996) work that the environmental justice movement is “the civil rights of the new millennium” (p. 25), and that the environment in this regard is defined as “the place you live, the place you work, and the place you play” (p. 17). Yet Checker makes it clear that the residents of Hyde Park see their misfortunes as explicit racism, and the environmental problems the neighborhood faces are just an extension of institutional racism in the south. Residents believe that they faced the “double whammy” of being black and poor (Checker's emphasis), and that their situation had “95 percent to do with race” (p. 94). Much of the reason for their feeling this way was because of neighboring Virginia Subdivision's (a low-income white neighborhood) success in receiving compensation and the judicial system's attention for many of the same environmental problems that plagued Hyde Park, of which they did not receive.

Hyde Park's history is inextricably linked to the institution of sharecropping following the Civil War. Some of the earliest residents of Hyde Park were black sharecroppers who were fortunate enough to be able to buy land, amid the fallacy that was sharecropping (emphasis mine). Land was the American Dream for these early settlers of Hyde Park, a dream that quickly became a nightmare in the
1990s when it was discovered that the hazardous waste-generating facilities and other nearby factories such as Southern Wood Piedmont (SWP) had contaminated the land, endangering the health of residents and making their homes almost impossible to sell (p. 75).

*Polluted Promises* is riddled with stories of residents and activists and their struggle with racism, health issues, and environmental contamination. Each chapter contains an interlude, the telling of a story to Checker by a Hyde Park resident. Many detail the memories of elderly residents and them telling about how the neighborhood has changed, how their families have become ill over the years, and how the things they did, such as heating their homes with wood-chips from SWP (which was laced with dangerous toxins), should have been made aware of to them by the appropriate government agencies.

Checker does a great job at distinguishing Hyde Park from the common misconceptions of poor, black communities. It is often suggested that poor people locate to areas of poor environmental quality because the land is made cheaper by undesirable land uses. It is also suggested that these poor neighborhoods cannot lift themselves out of poverty because of the lack of community. Checker maintains that both of these points in no way describe the situation in Hyde Park. Firstly, Hyde Park was there before the factories moved in. In fact, early Hyde Park residents struggled to get infrastructure into the neighborhood (sewer, water, roads). Secondly, Hyde Park has no problem with community. Their sense of community is so strong, that HAPIC has focused on relocation efforts for the community, instead of thinking about themselves first. This emphasis on relocation, however, has resulted in unsightly houses, of which a social scientist who had not spent six years in the neighborhood like Checker, would point to as a cause of their plight. But the fact is Hyde Park residents know that they will never be able to sell their properties, and see no need to spend what little income they have on making their homes look “sell-able”.

Checker touches on key issues in community and environmental organizing in *Polluted Promises*. She discussed how through a grant, HAPIC was able to purchase computers and other modern technologies. However, with very little education on how to use these devices, many organizers reverted back to mental organization and the proven method of pen and paper. This is important because it is not as simple as giving technology to disadvantaged communities and expecting them to pull themselves up. *Polluted Promises* also calls out mainstream environmental justice organizations and their tendencies of being comprised of white, well-to-do organizers and financiers. Checker includes a quote by Douglas Moore of the Washington Black United Front in 1970, calling environmentalist Ralph Nader “the biggest damn racist in the U.S.” for perverting the war on poverty to the war on pollution (p. 154). While I cannot disagree more strongly on Mr. Moore’s labeling of Ralph
Nader as a racist, it was important for Checker to include alternative viewpoints on the matter of national environmental movements, and the perception that whites were wanting to “save the day” without ever acknowledging the inherent racism of environmental injustice; that putting stricter standards on factories was never going to alleviate the “environmental genocide” of poor black communities.

*Polluted Promises* is a must read for college-level courses, including but not limited to sociology, history, urban studies, and African-American studies. Checker does a wonderful job at pulling all the necessary facets of environmental racism into a 288 page book, which includes her research methods and ways to get involved in the appendices. The book is free of academic jargon, and takes you on an emotional rollercoaster, but ends with a glimpse of hope. Hyde Park residents see environmental contamination as just another bullet-point on their list of struggles, but with effective organizing and networking, Checker, and I for that matter, see a future characterized by victory for the people of Hyde Park.

References
