

# UC Santa Barbara

## Spaces for Difference: An Interdisciplinary Journal

### Title

Book Review: Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism and the Search for Justice in a Southern Town by Melissa Checker

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*Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism and the Search for Justice in a Southern Town.* Melissa Checker: New York University Press (2005). ISBN 081471658X, 288 pp.

Reviewed by MICHELLE PETRIE



Although environmental justice scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to documenting the prevalence of environmental inequity there has been a significant gap in research on the dynamics of the activists and leaders of communities who are at the heart of the movement. Melissa Checker's *Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism and the Search for Justice in a Southern Town* (2005 New York: New York University Press) helps to fill this scholarly void through in-depth participant observation research in a neighborhood in Augusta, Georgia that is besieged by numerous toxic threats.

Checker's ethnographic account of the struggles faced by an urban, mostly lower income, African American community experiencing numerous toxic threats is based on her year long participation in the community's neighborhood association. Checker also collects personal historical accounts of inequity experienced by the community. Checker's study successfully seeks to demonstrate a history of urban African American activism that crosses class lines and challenges notions of an apathetic urban underclass abandoned by an upwardly mobile black middle class.

One of the primary aims of this research, however, is to "consider the multiple ways in which race and the environment are connected, and how people think about, experience and organize around such issues in the post-civil rights era" (p. 9). It is the achievement of this ambitious goal that emerges as a significant theoretical strength of *Polluted Promises*. Checker's examination of race not only contributes to the race and class discourse that has been prevalent in the field of environmental justice studies but it also adds to our understanding of identity politics and grassroots organizing in the environmental justice movement.

It is by no accident that Checker chooses to use the term environmental racism in the book's subtitle as opposed to the more holistic term environmental justice. Checker places racial group identity as a central organizing principle of the community's activism, but demonstrates that it is a fluid identity that can be used strategically by community leaders to cater to non-minority audiences. Race is used as a tool to understand the activists' shared experiences as well as

unite community members in a common bond. Race, however, is subdued and/or avoided by leadership in some mixed-race settings where it is perceived to be beneficial to construct a more inclusive narrative that may garner wider support and more resources. It is here that Checker could have further explored the policy implications of her research by drawing on Wilson's ideas of a hidden agenda, which emphasizes class issues over race in order to deflect negative public opinion regarding race based social policy while at the same time still benefiting minorities (Wilson 1990). While her research counters many of the ideas of Wilson's work on the black urban poor, her findings do coincide with Wilson's own policy suggestions. Checker could have similarly discussed the selective use of race in terms of the social movement framing literature. For example, her research underscores the construction of both restricted and elaborated master frames.

Checker's focus on the strategic use of race shows how this particular community's activism relied on both identity politics and resource mobilization which she argues resulted in the convergence of the two paradigms. Both theoretical models are relevant to the community's success and Checker persuasively demonstrates that similar to the convergence of environmentalism and civil rights, the resource mobilization and new social movement approaches also converge in the environmental justice movement (p. 32).

In addition to documenting the significance of race in the environmental justice narrative, Checker's research uncovers a host of other challenges facing the community. This includes working with environmental experts and technical talk, building trusting relationships with the Environmental Protection Agency, and developing coalitions and alliances. Her research also provides an in-depth exploration of what human geographers that study environmental justice refer to as the racialization of places. Checker documents the historical development of the neighborhood as well as the historical significance of racial politics and economic development decisions that resulted in the toxic donut that surrounds this community.

In sum, *Polluted Promises* is a rich ethnography of the people who comprise the environmental justice movement. The book's accessibility lends itself for use in both undergraduate and graduate courses. Although trained as an anthropologist, Checker's research crosses many disciplines and scholars of social movements, race and ethnic relations, qualitative research methods, human geography, and environmental justice will likely find this book of interest.

*Reference*

Wilson, William Julius. 1990. *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

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