On the afternoon of his thirty-ninth birthday, Arthur Smith Jr., a tall, handsome African American man with graying hair and an easy smile, rushed into the library of the Clara E. Jenkins Elementary School. It was 3:30 p.m., and Smith was late. His last engagement, one of four community organization meetings or activities he had attended that day, had run over. Although it was only March, in Augusta, Georgia, heat and humidity had already descended, and small beads of sweat stood out on Smith’s brow. Catching his breath and assuming one of his trademark grins, Smith strode into the room. Seated around three small tables, twelve African American fourth and fifth graders turned their heads.

“Mr. Arthur Jr.’s here,” exclaimed Frank, a bright fourth grader. Smith walked to the library’s windows and stood before the children. Behind him stretched the school’s well-trodden brownish green field, with its rusting jungle gym. Framed on two sides by long ditches, the field marked the beginning of Augusta’s Hyde Park neighborhood, home to approximately two hundred African American families. If you followed the ditches, which lined both sides of the neighborhood’s seven streets, you would see rows of small, mostly one-story shotgun-style homes surrounded by ample lawns. Some of these houses were freshly whitewashed cottages. Others were covered in peeling paint and leaned on their foundations. Between almost every home and its yard was a porch, usually set up with chairs and often filled with families and neighbors. Some yards bloomed with daisies, chrysanthemums, and lilacs, but since the early 1990s, none included a single patch of vegetables.

Clearing the spring’s pollen from his throat, Smith asked, “What’s contamination?”

“Pollution,” answered Cherise.
Smith nodded and then explained,

Pollution. That’s right. Poison is another word for it. Contamination is poison. What did Dr. King do during the civil rights movement? He marched. Why was he a marcher? Because everybody’s an American no matter what race, color, or creed you are. He was marching because the poor in this country are left out. To show the country how to live up to its constitution, “We the people” means everything. Forty years ago, nobody thought that racism in the South could be broken. What is racism?

Fifth grader Shanequa Jones replied, “Somebody don’t like the color of your skin.”

Smith nodded once again. Having spent most of his life a block from the home of Shanequa’s grandmother (where Shanequa spent half the week), Smith had known her since the day she was born. He continued,

That’s right. Somebody don’t like you for the color of your skin. See that’s what happened in Hyde Park and Aragon Park. Somebody said that we wasn’t human. But the God who serves, sits high and looks low. So, things are happening in this area and it’s all for you. It’s for your college education; it’s to make sure that you have a job when you grow up. It’s to make sure you get everything you’re entitled to.

Pausing for a moment, Smith glanced out of the window. “Has anybody ever noticed the signs that say playing in ditches is hazardous to your health?” he asked.

Lorenzo Thomas, a shy fourth grader who lived a few houses away from Smith on Willow Street, answered quietly, “On Willow Street.”

Smiling briefly at Lorenzo, Smith continued,

You know, when I was a little boy we used to catch tadpoles in the ditches and save them and trade them. Yeah, we did all that. But young people, do not go in the ditches out here. Ditches here are highly polluted. Contaminants can get into your feet. Understand you got to take care of you. We need y’all healthy.

Arthur Smith’s speech to the children of Jenkins Elementary School that warm spring day traversed subjects from contamination to civil
rights to democracy to educational and economic opportunity to childhood memory and back to contamination. The multitude of topics that Smith wrapped into one discussion of his neighborhood's history is no accident. For Smith and his fellow activists in Hyde Park, all these things are inextricably linked to each other and to a history fraught with discrimination and struggle.

Like many Americans, I spent most of my life thinking of the environment as primarily a white middle-class issue. Saving whales, recycling, and preserving forests seemed hardly to affect the lives of poor and minority people, especially since these people tend to live in urban areas. My own activist endeavors centered on housing and other urban social justice concerns. Then, while searching for a research topic on a major issue facing America’s cities, I read Robert Bullard’s *Dumping in Dixie* (1990), which clearly and explicitly outlined how racist institutions caused people of color to bear a disproportionate burden of our nation’s toxic waste. Bullard made me realize that I had been dead wrong in not considering the environment a social justice issue. Rather, it is inextricably linked to our country’s history of racism.

I began my research on environmental justice activism in Brooklyn, New York, where I worked with a group of Hasidic, Latino, and
African American activists who had come together to fight the installation of a fifty-two-foot incinerator in their neighborhood. Over the course of several months, I sat at community meetings and interviewed activists, listening as they described how many of their children, relatives, and neighbors were sick with strange forms of cancer and other diseases. I marveled at how the New York City government could slate this neighborhood, which already had two highways running through it and a Superfund site on its perimeter, for an incinerator. In this case, local activists eventually won the support of enough politicians to stop the plan. As I further researched environmental justice and searched for a location for a longer research project, I realized that the Brooklyn situation was not uncommon—but the residents’ success in fighting it was.

I thus set out to investigate (1) how environmental organizing has both changed and been incorporated into urban African American activism, and (2) what I, as an anthropologist, could do to participate in environmental justice. Hyde Park turned out to be a perfect location for answering both questions: it has been polluted in both an ecological and social sense since its inception as a neighborhood, and its residents have been fighting that pollution equally as long. For not only are Hyde Park’s ecological resources (air, water, and soil) contaminated, but its social resources (access to decent jobs, housing, schools, and police protection) are also contaminated due to a history of discrimination against African Americans. The resilience and fortitude that I found among Hyde Park’s residents, despite all these experiences, truly enlightened and inspired me. It is that perseverance that I have tried to depict and explore in this book.

Welcome to Hyde Park

Just after World War II, Hyde Park’s first residents finally said farewell to sharecropping in rural Georgia and used their savings to buy small plots of land in a swampy area, a few miles from the heart of downtown Augusta. For the next twenty-plus years, even as the neighborhood swelled to two hundred families, Hyde Park residents made do without indoor plumbing, running water, or gas stoves. Living on swampland also meant that they struggled through numerous floods, often having to canoe out of the neighborhood to get to work and
school. Back then, Hyde Park residents were nearly all employed—many in nearby factories or as domestics. The neighborhood was a vibrant place, with small groceries, churches, barbershops, and even a few bars where residents could take the edge off a long week’s work. But for the rest of Augusta, Hyde Park was almost invisible. Surrounded by a junkyard, a railway line, and an industrial ceramics plant on one side, a power plant on another, a brickyard and a second railway on a third, and a highway on the remaining side, Hyde Park essentially formed the hole of an industrial donut. The fact that low-income African American families lived inside that hole made it even less likely to be noticed, especially by Augusta’s mostly white politicians.

In the late 1960s, Hyde Park residents, fed up with their lack of county services, caught on to the heels of the national civil rights movement and formed the Hyde and Aragon Park Improvement Committee (HAPIC). After several years of tenacious community agitation, HAPIC activists won water, gas, and sewer lines, streetlights, paved roads, and flood control ditches—infrastructure that most other Augusta neighborhoods had received long before. Throughout the 1970s, as local industries downsized and employment rates declined, they worked hard to improve residents’ education, job opportunities, and access to health care. In the 1980s, they added a fight against the selling of drugs and drug-related violence to that agenda, as Hyde Park’s streets became a popular local venue for buying and selling crack cocaine.

Some residents also began to fall ill with mysterious or uncommon forms of cancer and skin diseases. Around 1990, they discovered one possible reason for local maladies. In the early part of the 1980s, Southern Wood Piedmont (SWP), a nearby wood-preserving factory, detected soil and groundwater contamination, including dioxins, chlorophenols, and other wood treatment chemicals. On further investigation, SWP found that the groundwater pollution extended off-site along two plumes. The factory closed in 1988 and began to remediate the contamination. Two years later, Virginia Subdivision, a low-income, predominantly white community that backed right onto SWP property settled a class action lawsuit against SWP and its parent companies, International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation (ITT) and ITT Rayonier. Although the ditches that lined Hyde Park’s streets eventually made their way to the edges of SWP’s property, residents had never been told about the lawsuit, let alone asked to join it; therefore, they received no compensation. Hyde Park residents believed that this exclusion had
much to do with the fact that their neighborhood is 99 percent African American. HAPIC geared up for another community-wide struggle, now making environmental justice its main priority. This time, however, rather than fighting Augusta’s city hall, the organization took on an international conglomerate.

Hyde Park residents soon realized that Southern Wood was not the only nearby industry to emit toxins. There were reports that Georgia Power’s transformer station, which sits on one side of Dan Bowles Road, just across from a number of homes, had leaked polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). For years, the plume from Thermal Ceramics, an industrial ceramics plant on the neighborhood’s edge, had lit the skies at night. Many mornings, people living just down the road found their cars covered in a fine white dust. Chemicals also flowed from Goldberg Brothers scrap metal yard (about a half a block from Georgia Power) into Hyde Park’s ditches and yards. Residents (children in particular) suffered from rashes, lupus, respiratory and circulatory problems, and rare forms of cancer.

An array of studies conducted throughout the 1990s found high levels of certain chemicals in the neighborhood’s soil and groundwater, but no conclusive evidence could link those chemicals to health problems. For example, a 1991 study that found higher than normal levels of chromium and arsenic in Hyde Park soil led some experts to suggest that people stop growing vegetable gardens and prevent their children from playing in ditches or dirt around the neighborhood. However, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) contended that the levels of heavy metals found in the soil were within normal ranges, and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) determined that community members were probably not being currently exposed to contamination. Yet, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) tests conducted in 1993 found that the scrap yard on Dan Bowles Road contained widespread lead and PCBs contamination and lesser amounts of arsenic and chromium. Although the yard’s owner built an embankment to prevent its water from flowing into Hyde Park, later EPA investigations found high enough levels of PCBs and lead in the yards of at least one home near the junkyard to warrant a $100,000 cleanup. Then, in 2001, an EPA-sponsored environmental investigation of the junkyard led to a $7 million cleanup that removed fifteen thousand tons of waste from the property.

For every study that has shown evidence of significant contamina-
tion, there seems to be another that contradicts or mitigates it, leaving residents (and researchers) confused. At least some of the dangerous chemicals just mentioned appeared in nearly every study report, but how intensely they were concentrated, and whether and to what degree they posed a health threat remain very much up for debate. Therefore, residents have won neither a corporate settlement nor government funds to help them clean up or relocate from the neighborhood. At the same time, it became almost impossible for them to sell their homes due to fears of contamination. By the time I came to Hyde Park in 1998 to conduct research with HAPIC, I found that the neighborhood’s inhabitants had gotten mired in the (figurative and literal) toxic stew that surrounded them.

Hyde Park residents have thus had the deck stacked against them from the get-go. They grew up under the cruel thumb of Jim Crow and over the years had to fight for neighborhood infrastructure and against the unemployment, drugs, and violence that plagued their community. Then, people in the neighborhood seemed to get sick and to die at an alarming rate. Although high levels of dangerous chemicals had been found in their air, water, and soil, they could not link the two issues

Children playing on carpet laid over dirt, 1999. Photo by author.
according to established scientific standards. What Hyde Park’s approximately 250 residents have had, however, is a history of successful organizing, as well as a history of being a close-knit, “pull-together” kind of community. They also had a cadre of activists, like Arthur Smith, who managed to hold on to a tremendous amount of faith, energy, and hope, working tirelessly to come up with strategies for improving neighborhood schools, reducing crime and violence, and finding a way out of contamination.

Activist Ethnography

From September 1998 through October 1999, I joined these struggles by volunteering with HAPIC (see appendix A, where I provide a more detailed description of my methodology). HAPIC has never had full-time staff members and relies on whatever after-work time its board members can spare. My work included writing grant proposals, creating a website, organizing after-school and summer programs for youth, and helping plan community meetings and cleanup days. My anthropological background became a useful tool for fulfilling my activist proclivities, and activism, in turn, enriched my anthropological study in many ways. For example, having grown up in a white, middle-class suburb of Washington, D.C., I was a stranger to Hyde Park on many counts. My volunteering for HAPIC made it possible for me to get to know a variety of adults and children in the neighborhood on an informal, everyday basis, as well as providing me with access to information about HAPIC’s historical activities. Participating in HAPIC also allowed me to experience firsthand the ups and downs of community activism. Equally important, it enabled me to give something back to these people, who had allowed me to spend time in their neighborhood and to ask them countless questions. Finally, it provided me with a way to exercise my own commitments to activism, which include the writing and publication of this book.

Main Aims

In 2004, black male earnings were 70 percent that of white men, the life expectancy for blacks was six years shorter than that for whites, and
blacks who were arrested were three times more likely to be imprisoned than whites who were arrested. Racial segregation, discrimination, and disparities remain pernicious in today’s United States, despite the passing of civil rights legislation, the dismantling of ideas about the biological basis of race, and contemporary celebrations of multiculturalism. Why are the life chances of so many African Americans, especially in urban settings, different than those of white Americans? And what on earth does the environment have to do with it?

Somewhere in the middle to late 1980s in the United States, two important social movements—environmentalism and civil rights—converged in an effort to answer these questions. This convergence is taking place around the globe in rural areas, small towns, and big cities, wherever marginalized people realize that they bear the brunt of housing the world’s industrial waste. In the United States, environmental justice seeks not just relief from contamination but also access to a host of resources (such as decent housing, schools, and/or police protection) that are traditionally denied to people of color. For this reason, U.S. environmental justice activists initially dubbed their movement “the civil rights movement of the new millennium.” For many, a civil rights legacy provides a foundation from which activists think about and struggle with environmental problems.

This book shows that environmental racism extends far beyond the straightforward poisoning of air, water, or soil. That Hyde Park residents cannot point a finger at one deliberate polluter is highly typical of environmental justice communities. Their difficulties in meeting established scientific and legal standards to prove their case are also typical, due in large part to the inexactness of environmental science and the biases that it contains. The Hyde Park case is thus emblematic of the complicated and invidious ways in which environmental racism works—how it is embedded in discriminatory institutional practices, policies, and procedures, and how it accumulates over many years. Indeed, one of this book’s main aims 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. More simply, this ethnography is the story of how one group of activists understood the links between toxic waste and race.

We have few, if any, full-length ethnographies of one environmental justice group. But why devote an entire book to the study of one small organization? My close-up view of one African American group
struggling against environmental racism answers questions about how people define and practice environmental justice activism on an everyday basis and in the context of their daily lives and struggles. I show how one group strategized and restrategized as it went through the ups and downs of a more than decade-long environmental justice battle, and more than thirty years of fighting for civil rights. My on-the-ground view thus reveals what inspires people to act collectively to improve their lives, what discourages them from such actions, and how periods that seem to be lacking in social movement activity are actually where the nurturing of the powerful community identities that foster activism takes place.

Apart from being a compelling example of environmental injustice, the case of Hyde Park also encapsulates many of the myriad issues at stake when we talk about environmental justice. For instance, Hyde Park’s story shows us how environmental science and environmental laws are skewed toward particular perspectives that do not address the needs of minorities or encompass their experiences. It shows the tenuousness of alliances between environmentalists and grassroots environmental justice activists. Further, it shows how people understand and use the term “environment” in very different ways, which in turn affect how they act toward it. Thus, a detailed, on-the-ground account can refine and sharpen what we already know about political organizing, the pursuit of environmental justice, and who benefits from current environmental policies and practices. Studying one organization in depth also allows me to concentrate on the significance of everyday meanings —how specific cultural histories shape the ways activists explain the terms of their collective actions. For example, Hyde Park residents defined the “environment,” “environmental racism,” and “environmental justice” according to their specific experiences as southern African Americans living in a low-income urban neighborhood. That subjectivity often contrasts with the ways that white middle-class institutions define such terms.

Today the question of subjectivity confounds activists and academics alike. In this case it presents an obvious paradox: Doesn’t activism skew objectivity? Isn’t politics the opposite of science? This book shows that all accounts, even scientific ones, are made from particular positions. The Hyde Park position is underrepresented in public discourse; my job as an activist and as an anthropologist is to make it more audible. The risk here is obvious—if even scientists have agendas, then how can sci-
entific facts be trusted? How do we know that environmental damage takes place at all? Does a focus on cultural perceptions of reality only lead us into a relativist labyrinth, where facts are endlessly disputed with other facts? Again, this work itself models an answer, examining who benefits from a given presentation of facts and placing the cultural relativity of experience and perception into a material context. Or, people may understand the environment, race, and poverty in different ways, but certain of those ideas have more power than others. In turn, those dominant ideas have very real effects on the material conditions in which some people live.

For example, pernicious assumptions that poor, urban African Americans are “disorganized,” “uneducated,” and mired in poverty led to the proliferation and the permanence of unwanted industry and land uses in Hyde Park. It appears that local politicians and corporations assumed residents would not care about, or contest, such sites. As recently as the summer of 2001 (long after Hyde Park’s toxic problems had attracted numerous local news reports and even federal grants), Augusta’s planning department permitted a local company to establish a landfill in the neighborhood. Even more recently, late in 2003, the planning department approved a new recycling facility directly across from the former junkyard. After twenty years of protest, residents had finally received a federal grant that led to that junkyard’s cleanup. Despite all the publicity and effort surrounding that cleanup, someone in the planning department seemed to assume that another landfill or another “recycling center” (often this is a euphemism for “junkyard”) would go unnoticed and uncontested in a neighborhood like Hyde Park.

As this ethnography and HAPIC’s eventual success in stopping the recycling center attest, the planning department got it wrong. From the inception of their neighborhood and for more than three decades, Hyde Park residents organized against the racial discrimination they faced. Yet, despite the fact that this history of activism can be found in scores of poor black neighborhoods throughout America’s cities, we have few ethnographies that depict black activism or the agency of black community members. Thus, this book offers an in-depth documentation of the organization and political mobilization that is characteristic of urban black neighborhoods.

In presenting the results of my ethnographic research on a new kind of activism, I hope that this book will accomplish some activism of its own. I therefore gear it toward multiple audiences, including activists,
academics, students, and others. By focusing on the people of Hyde Park and their struggles, I offer an instructive and analytic look at many of the issues that commonly arise as people fight for environmental justice. In so doing, I alert readers not only to the very real, and very complex, problems of environmental racism but also to how one group fought it, day by day. It is my hope that this detailed ethnographic account will provide readers with a deeper and more personalized understanding of environmental injustice, and what can be done to combat it. For those who finish this book and wonder, “What can I do?” appendix B lists contact information for a number of local grassroots environmental justice groups and other resources. Indeed, one of my biggest aspirations is that the stories of the people depicted here—their courage, their stamina, and their consistent ability to adapt their strategies to changing circumstances—will inspire readers to engage in some activism of their own.