

**Commentaries on the 2018 Clyde Woods Black Geographies Specialty Group  
Graduate Student Paper Award**

**On Teona Williams' "For 'Peace, Quiet, and Respect': Race, Policing, and  
Land Grabbing on Chicago's South Side"**

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Teona Williams punctuates her award-winning article "For 'Peace, Quiet, and Respect': Race, Policing, and Land Grabbing on Chicago's South Side" with a warning. She writes, "our dream of environmental justice will never be realised if when all pollution is eradicated, the police remain" (p.518). Following critical scholarship that extends the framework of environmental racism to policing and incarceration (Braz and Gilmore 2006; Dillon and Sze 2018; Gilmore 2008; Wright 2021), Williams examines the immediate physical violence of police brutality alongside the slow violence of routine policing as forms of environmental control.

To highlight the intersections of environmental injustice and policing, Williams interrogates the University of Chicago's role in developing, gentrifying, and policing Hyde Park. Since the University's founding in the 1890s, it has practiced a breed of racism branded as a benevolent environmental vision for an urban garden campus. While different in form from environmental hazards like waste incinerators or oil refineries, the University's ostensibly "sustainable" green development initiatives impose disproportionate burdens on local working-

class Black communities that similarly threaten their lives and livelihoods. These initiatives work to contain and displace local residents beyond the bounds of the University's ever-expanding campus through urban renewal, gentrification, and policing.

Williams' article invites us to carefully heed the confluence of carceral geographies with progressive agendas. The intersection of policing, college town liberalism, and sustainable planning and development is not unique to Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. For example, a now-defeated proposal for carceral expansion in 2008 in another college town, Bloomington, Indiana, was framed as project of liberal benevolence through social justice discourses inflected with therapy and rehabilitation goals (Schept 2015). Advocates of Bloomington's carceral growth – a new jail, a juvenile detention facility, and a community corrections work release center – also tied it to local sustainability initiatives by emphasizing the importance of “green thinking” and design for the facilities. More broadly, rhetorical positioning of the carceral as a form of social welfare – rather than a form of punishment – goes back to the Progressive Era spanning the 1890s to the 1920s. Alongside these ongoing forms of progressivism, modern initiatives like green prisons (National Institute of Corrections 2017) and low-emissions cop cars (Cholodofsky 2019) pay lip service to sustainability while staking claim for the continued place of carceral geographies in our “greening” world. This liberal, green fog works to naturalize carceral geographies as social benefits and inevitable futures and, in the process, obscures the structural causes that contribute to poverty and crime. Clearing away the fog, Williams reads Hyde Park and other urban environments labeled as “sustainable” instead as unsustainable and violent “products of uneven development that thrive on Black dispossession and degradation” (p.501).

Returning now to Williams' assertion that environmental justice is impossible if police remain when all the pollution is gone, I'd like to make a slight modification. *All the pollution cannot be eradicated, in fact, until the police are gone, since police themselves are a form of*

*pollution*. As Williams' article evidences, along with other scholarship and organizing around the intersections of environmental violence and police, policing is an environmental justice issue. Like other forms of environmental racism, policing requires and reinforces the disposability of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color. Heavily policed communities, moreover, must also contend with concentrations of more conventionally-understood forms of environmental contamination ranging from Superfund sites, highways, and waste treatment facilities (Dillon and Sze 2016) to the noise, light, and air pollution wrought by policing itself (Costley 2020). Carceral geographies are, thus, deeply intertwined with other forms of environmental degradation that produce premature death in primarily poor communities of color. Understanding policing as a significant form of pollution helps to place marginal human ecologies at the center of analysis so that visions of sustainable futures sustain – rather than control, degrade, and erase – these communities. Our world's collective ecological future depends on the transformation of conditions that made and continue to make policing possible.

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