

**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' terrific "For 'Peace, Quiet, and Respect': Race, Policing, and Land Grabbing on Chicago's South Side" is a major theoretical intervention that connects important activist movements, in a geo-historical context. What is particularly innovative is in its conjoining of environmental justice, urban political ecology, and abolitionist/anti-gentrification and policing literatures and lenses. Using Chicago (specifically Hyde Park) and the University of Chicago, Williams takes us on an important journey through how anti-black violence is a form of environmental control – what she calls “the political ecology of police brutality” (p.504). She draws upon theories of environmental conflict, crime narratives, urban development regimes (from urban renewal to contemporary revitalization), and links these beautifully and with deep urgency. The stakes are literally of life and death, as she poignantly reminds us in the opening, which recounts the death of Rekia Boyd at the hands of an off-duty police officer.

As Williams writes, understanding the social and ideological constructions of the “undesirability of Blackness, be it in parks or on campuses, only help to expand how we must combat the twinned

workings of environmental and racial injustice” (p.516). Drawing on foundational scholars in environmental justice (Ruth Wilson Gilmore, David Pellow, Laura Pulido), Williams outlines what a critical environmental justice approach to police brutality looks like, one that integrates equally the scholarship from radical and abolitionist geographies. Her innovation is to ground the analysis in these debates and within a specific place, with a laser-focus on anti-black racism and Black resistance to surveillance and policing. Williams reminds us that ideologies of landscapes and places have consistently in the US been tied to anti-black cultural narratives, what philosopher Charles Mills (2001) named as “Black trash”. The notion that environmental pollution and place are tightly conjoined to race has been challenged by at least three decades of environmental justice and community organizing – from Black neighborhoods in Chicago, Baltimore, New York, New Orleans, and Los Angeles, to Navajo uranium mines, and beyond. Williams reminds us, drawing from Carolyn Finney and Willie Jamaal Wright, that Black senses of place have often been constructed and reinforced through spatial ideologies that create the material conditions of life and death. The only comment I have is that I hope future versions of this work (whether her own or taken by others as it will be) take the idea of “land grabbing” in the title deeply vis à vis scholarship and activism from Indigenous studies and communities (i.e. Kyle T. Mays, Tiffany Lethabo King, and others working at the intersections of Black/Indigenous studies).

Williams’ masterful emplacement of the role of culture and ideology (crime narratives) draws upon institutions that seek to “naturalize” their worldview, in the University of Chicago case, of the campus as a “garden”, that seeks to create “safety” for itself from the surrounding majority Black community. Her case study of the Chicago campus is especially significant given the central role of the University of Chicago and its centrality in the field of sociology and its theories of “ecological succession” which impacted urban and federal policy for decades. The story of the University of Chicago is both exceptional and typical, and thus useful for those seeking to understand the role of higher education in cities all across the urban US landscape. Williams ends the story with a tempered sense of optimism, focusing on student activism against policing through abolitionist arguments and

campaigns that frame the urgency for “care not cops”. Rather than the garden, she focuses on top-down urban development as a “garrison state” where various people associated with a wide range of social movements practice what she calls the “Black radical spatial imaginary”, performing acts of remembrance and subversion in active opposition to hegemonic state and racial power.

In total, this article historicizes and theorizes in innovative ways, and provides a useful vocabulary that has quite wide applicability in many realms. In environmental justice scholarship, Williams exemplifies an interdisciplinarity that pushes the field in important ways.

Reference

Mills C W (2001) Black trash. In L Westra and B E Lawson (eds) *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice* (2nd edn) (pp73-91). Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield