

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

Author's Reply

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Abolition geography starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place.
(Gilmore 2017: 227)

Ruth Wilson Gilmore powerfully reminds us that freedom is the greatest placemaking project. Therefore abolition, quite literally, is the destruction of (carceral) geographies. It is in this spirit, and in the spirit of all the scholars in Black Geographies, that I first felt inspired to write about my own lived experiences at the University of Chicago. I wanted to understand the intersections between environmental injustice and police violence. My own childhood experiences of “living just enough for the city”, made me feel quite at home on the South Side of Chicago. For the first time since college, I felt comfortable and at ease in a space. It seemed like the exact opposite of my college – which is in one of the whitest states in the country. As I blindly stoked my jealousy of my peers who got to study there all the time, I soon threw those rose-colored glasses off, as I

became increasingly aware of the anti-black and hyper-policed landscape that was Hyde Park and beyond. By the end of the summer, I swore to never to return, a luxury I had as an outsider, a subject position that I am acutely aware of now. Black Geographies gave me the language not only to understand the University of Chicago Police Department, but to also understand myself.

To the respondents, Celeste Winston and Julie Sze, thank you for such invigorating responses to my work. Your ideas and applications of some of my findings reminds me that the “published” article is an entryway into deeper conversations and never the finished product! To Katherine McKittrick at *Antipode* and the reviewers of the Clyde Woods Black Geographies Specialty Group Graduate Student Paper Award, thank you for your generosity and engagement. It comes as no surprise that some of the best places for me to be myself as academic, is through the work and community of scholars in Black Geographies.

I most importantly want to thank Clyde Woods. His legacy is entrenched in all my work. In this project, Woods set the tone for how one studies the intersections between race, space and nature. In my dissertation, I found myself closely reading *Development Arrested* (Woods 1998), deeply studying Mississippi, and deep in thought alongside Woods. My dissertation follows a cadre of rural and poor Black women whose demands for food sovereignty informed the environmental legacies of the Black Power and Black Feminist movements. As I pore over the lives of the daughters of the Delta, I cannot help but think “this is exactly what Woods said!” Thank you, Clyde Woods, and may you continue to rest in power. I of course want to thank Ruth Wilson Gilmore for paving the way for us as well. I hope in my response to build on the wonderful themes of universal particulars, police as pollutants, and racialized conceptions of ecological succession, as highlighted from my brilliant respondents!

Being in part trained as a historian, I want to build on Winston’s and Sze’s apt acknowledgment of the history of other police forces both public and private, and their impact on cities. As Winston and Sze gesture us toward, this is the University of Cincinnati, this is UCLA,

this is Yale, this in many ways is not a story about Hyde Park. I return to Davarian Baldwin's (2015) illuminating concept of "univer-cities" to mark how institutions of higher education have an alarming amount of power on par with local municipalities. I am also drawn to Dan Berger's (2021) conceptualization of "particular and universal" in a way to highlight how the police and the prison particular is always indoctrinated in the carceral universal. In this understanding of the particular and universal, I think about how the University of Chicago was a part of a wider network of universities who dispossessed Indigenous groups, sold off enslaved populations to build endowments, land grabbed and gentrified, drained city resources without paying taxes, and amassed large private police forces, all in the name of urban conservation. But what then becomes particular about Hyde Park? Or about the University of Chicago? Outside of it having one of the largest private police forces in the world, one of the ways I approached the particular, is by sharing firsthand accounts of Black youth's experiences being terrorized by the UCPD. I thought about the deep emotional and psychological impacts that come with being labeled a threat or criminal and tried in that way to show the particularities of a place and experience.

As Winston rightfully highlights, police forces are pollutants. There are numerous reports from doctors and public health officials that highlight the long-term health impacts of hyperpolicing and police violence. Victims of police surveillance and violence suffer from depression and poor mental health, and it also impacts the body which can lead to shortened life expectancies from exposure to stress. Those who live in the wake of police violence suffer prolonged economic hardship. Adriane Lentz-Smith (forthcoming) theorizes this as the slow violence of police brutality. Police brutality often marks a spectacular and immediate violence. Lentz-Smith, through following the life police brutality survivor Sagon Penn, highlights how police brutality is also a slow violence. She highlights the devastating and violent end of Penn's life as a result of being profiled and brutalized by the police. In this way, as Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze (2016) have noted, police forces mingle with air and soil pollutants, creating toxic

ecologies. The discourses around policing and environmental injustice also intermingle. Governments and corporations try to find baseline amounts of noxious air that people can inhale without dying, in their mind a practical threshold that keeps chemical plants and oil refineries in majority Black and poor communities. Likewise, governments seek to reform police departments in a way to minimize instead of eradicating harm. Therefore, as Gilmore (2017) notes, abolition is the only possible future. There is no acceptable baseline or threshold of any pollutant that would enable a just future.

Size offers the language of ecological succession, a framework I wished I used in the article, to highlight how mainstream environmental ideas around preservation and conservation are rooted in genocide and scientific racism. I approached this by taking as an example the University of Chicago's embrace of racial covenants and funding the South East Chicago Commission (SECC) as a form of urban preservation. However, the university's most successful strategy was not to garrison itself in, like other suburbs before it; instead, by buying up land and spearheading intense development efforts it was able to change the environment over time, manipulating the urban ecosystem into its gentrified college town. If this sounds insidious it is because it is. Some of the strongest push-back to earlier versions of this project was from retired faculty or alum who vehemently denied the university's real estate sites deep on the South Side of Chicago. The language of ecological succession, when steeped in deep racist, anti-black, settler-colonial logics, speaks to how institutions of higher education across the country seek to control and sanitize their surrounding areas.

I want to end with what I missed in this essay. While I opened it with Rekia Boyd and hinted at the toxic masculinity that is any police force, there was so much I could have done with gender. There have been numerous articles that center #SayHerName and the impacts of policing on black womxn and girls (Chatelain 2015). Further I am deeply thinking about the wave of deaths in the Black trans community both at the hands of the police and through transphobic

violence. The police itself exude a toxic masculinist violence, a force that disproportionately targets the lives of Black womxn and girls. I am deeply aware that you can disimbricate race, class, gender and sexuality from any history of policing and police departments. In a larger project I look forward to building off the work of Sarah Haley (2016) and others to think deeply about Black Feminism and the police.

This essay started with an experience I had nearly ten years ago while a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow at the University of Chicago. I remember sitting in on a campus safety talk that strongly suggested we avoid the South Side of Chicago, even though technically Hyde Park is located in Chicago's south. I remember the fear that students and others had about people who looked like me, and who had the same jobs that my own family held. It was an experience and question that I did not know how to process at 20 years old. In part this research is my own way to process what it meant to be feared and hyper-surveilled on campus. I became fascinated by the technologies of surveillance, to borrow from Simone Browne (2015), that the university used to create a garrison town. I became fascinated by how the so-called natural environment became a technology of surveillance, as a tool to racially set boundaries, and how the police became the personification of those forces. I explored how the very same spaces that attracted students and faculty, like the campus green spaces or the many university gardens, also became a site of anti-black violence at the hands of the UCPD. This essay was to name an experience, and I hope that future writing can do the much needed work of filling in the gaps. At the end of the day it becomes clear that what we need is a world without policing, and that includes private police and security forces. I want to end by invoking the much needed and urgent work of Mariame Kaba (2021) – *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*. It reminds me of the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, who coined the Black Feminist clarion call of “nobody's free until everybody's free” (in Brooks and Houck 2011). It is in this legacy of Kaba and Hamer that the need to abolish all campus police forces becomes overtly clear.

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