Simone Wilson, “Environmental Racism in the EPA”

**Statement from nominating teacher, Brian Gazaille:**

Simone Wilson’s “Environmental Racism in the EPA” was the most original and most thoroughly researched essay to come out of a 123 on Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*. During the first cycle, my students developed arguments about concrete problems in Coates’s memoir: police brutality, terrorism, “the Dream,” and the like. In the second, they worked both within and outside the text, identifying cases of oppression in other contexts. Many developed arguments to the effect that racism and sexism still exist in America; those papers argued that the oppression was unfair and needed to be eliminated—which is true. Simone’s project was distinctive in several ways, though. She was the only one of my students to consider how concerns of identity overlapped with concerns from seemingly distinct fields. Simone nicely engaged the connections between race, oppression, and environmental activism, a topic that Simone had discovered in her major coursework. Just as important, I appreciated that Simone’s paper addressed a question of consequence rather than a more basic question of policy, illustrating how the EPA’s treatment of corporations further oppressed marginalized communities. Not only was her paper politically relevant and tightly argued, but it made excellent use of concrete data to support its claims. I especially liked how Simone struck a balance between statistical, sociological argumentation and philosophical musing about, for instance, the important distinction between “environmental justice” and “environmental racism.” This ability to work seamlessly between different argumentative registers, I think, demonstrated an uncommon grasp of the role of research in rhetoric and vice versa.

**Excerpt**

Environmental racism entails that minority communities are much more likely to be exposed to environmental hazards, but particularly from pollution and waste from corporations. This is due to the fact that they reside in predominately industrial areas, and those areas pose higher risks of air and water pollution. Laura Pulido examines environmental racism within Los Angeles and recognizes how historical factors have shaped the housing market. During the mid-20th century whites began to flock to L.A. Refusing to live in the city center because of heavy minority populations, whites inhabited the periphery of L.A. (suburbia), which contributed to segregation of L. A. neighborhoods. Due to early zoning laws in the 1920s, industrial activity was, and still is, concentrated within minority neighborhoods (Pulido). White privilege, and wealth, enabled whites to leave industrial areas for more affluent neighborhoods, and further segregation by the housing market maintained the strict boundaries between white and minority communities. While L.A. only represents one city within the U.S, roughly 50 percent of the population is Latina and is therefore one of the most diverse major cities in the country. Historically, minorities were/are encouraged to live in industrial areas, and discouraged from moving away from them due to white affluence, poverty rates, and lingering housing market segregation.