

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**The Sun Never Set Upon The Blues: Reading and Honouring Clyde Woods, November
2012**

**“Hardly home, but always reppin’”: Remembering Black Human Worth,
Remembering Doctor Clyde A. Woods***

Mark V. Campbell

Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice

University of Guelph

mcampb14@uoguelph.ca

For a young emerging scholar, the oeuvre of Clyde Woods is an impeccable example of activist-academic work in a largely morally bankrupt world. There is a choice young scholars must make: the easy road of reproductive work, citing famous French scholars and fitting their research interests into the ruling regime of thought; or, the more difficult path - and from my perspective the more fulfilling work that, consequently, often also leads to marginal sessional jobs - which involves activism and an engagement with unpopular or unknown texts and ideas. Clyde Woods' work, particularly his critical treatment of blues epistemology, has been a life raft that incites and supports activist academic work that is indigenously to black folk life and unapologetic in its social justice agenda. By understanding and advancing, fully, the blues as a subterranean knowledge system born in the United States and its intellectual legacy - “philosophy, political economy, social theory and practice, and geographic knowledge” unwaveringly committed to the global achievement of social justice (2007: 49) - Woods unveils a world of hidden theoretical tools to excavate a better tomorrow.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

The clarity and rigour of Woods' work on the blues provides a template by which we might examine Afrodiasporic life, particularly through its artistic creations within late-capitalism and western thought. In his 2002 article 'Life after death' it is Woods' boldness in calling into question the role of scholars engaged in what he is calling "social triage" (2007: 63). Woods makes clear that his affinities lay with the devastated African American populations he studied. In his continual interrogation of the academy and its 'unintelligible response' to the modern day human disaster capitalism, better known as the plantocracy, Woods highlights the central connection between scholarship and activism while also illuminating the insularity of contemporary scholarship (see Woods 2002; 2009). In 'Life after death', Woods explains his deep connection to those outside of the academy, those that never enter the ivory-tower; he self-reflexively asks "Does our research in any way reflect the experiences, viewpoints and needs of the residents of these dying communities" (2002: 63)? Thus, the title of this short piece "Hardly home, but always reppin'" signifies on a lyric from Toronto emcee Drake, used here to illuminate the ways in which Woods, despite being firmly implanted in the university system, was always *representing for* rural black Americans, always ensuring we knew his work was not shaped by the modern comforts of the ivory tower, and that black human life has value within the context of our overdeveloped and urbicidal geographic landscape (see McKittrick 2011: 950).

One of the most brilliant and non-negotiable points of Woods scholarship has been the way in which blues epistemology deeply informs and orientates his moral and intellectual compass. It is only in times of crisis, according to Woods, that the fundamental aspects of blues tradition and development re-emerge from its obscured capitalist created enclave called entertainment (Woods 2009). When the politics of asset stripping, immiseration, systemic and structural impoverishment forcefully capture a national audience - as was the case with Katrina and the

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Jena 6 in the American South - not only do many major public intellectuals quickly become quiet, many public intellectuals lack the tools to effectively explain the situation.

With this in mind, notice the fall 2005 riots in France. As the state practiced coercive enclosure tactics, basically reinforcing a pass card system reminiscent of South Africa's apartheid and Canada's First Nation's reserves, France's black and brown youth exploded. Two youth died attempting to flee state authorities because they were regularly harassing black and brown youth for their identification cards - a clear policing of Frenchness and belonging. The country erupted in full-scale riots, erecting a blazing shrine of resistance to structural marginalization and over-policing that quite literally overshadowed the world-renowned Eiffel Tower. France's hip-hop communities had long prophesized the riots, providing scathing social critiques, which emerged from the likes of Group 113, Joey Starr, and Disiz La Peste's important album, *The Extraordinary Stories of A Youth in the Banlieue*. Popular media immediately blamed hip-hop with headlines such as 'Should hip hop take the rap for rioting?' (Muggs, 2005) and 'French rappers' prophecies come true' (Schofield, 2005). These 'prophecies' were in no way mystical, as Woods has shown: there exists a system of social critique embedded within the blues, and inherited by hip-hop, that has the capacity to accurately analyze the social relations that make life miserable for the majority of black and brown individuals in the west (Woods 2007). Perhaps Clyde Woods' impeccable, clear, and helpful analysis would have helped European philosophers understand the riots:

“...the dark truth of Afro-American music remains unquestionably oppositional. Its implacable Luciferian pride - that is, its aggressive and uncompromising assertion of the omnipotence of desire and imagination in the face of all resistances - forever provides a stumbling block for those who would like to exploit it as mere entertainment, a mere ruse

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

to keep the cash register ringing. Born in passionate revolt against the unlivable, the blues and jazz demand nothing less than a new life” (Woods 1998: 39).

While hip-hop took the blame for social unrest in France, public intellectuals such as Jean Baudrillard (2006) and Slavoj Žižek (2005) were unable to read black music and music-making as socio-analytical tools, texts, and enunciations. Baudrillard decided to focus on the collision of “two irreconcilable universes”, exerting effort to illuminate how 'othered' citizens are seduced by Western culture (2006: 6). For, Žižek the riots were simply “a meaningless outburst” that could present not even the “guise of a realistic alternative, or at least a meaningful utopian project” (2005: 64). Žižek views the riots as an indictment of “our predicament” (*ibid.*) rather than a fierce expression of the unfreedom black and brown youth face on the daily. Again, black and brown youth are objects in a seemingly 'philosophical' analysis that rigidly and rigorously refuses to acknowledge the possibility of an alternative knowledge system or an embedded social critique connected to Western expansion and capitalist exploitation within black music.

In *Development Arrested*, Woods rightly asserts that “the struggle over who will interpret black music is an intellectual battle that has been raging throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (1998: 38). He clearly outlines his interpretation of the blues as embedded within a trajectory an African American thought that impacted upon and shaped the creative and intellectual work of authors such as Albert Murray, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and the Black Arts Movement (see Woods 1998: 36). Woods, in his academic work, aligns himself with a lineage of African American intellectuals and artists whom exemplify the blues tradition and epistemology. By doing this, not only does he practice an indigenous form of social critique that refuses to alienate African American life from itself, he also demonstrates an unwavering commitment to social justice and human development.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Clyde Woods' bold and inalienable social justice orientation has provided me with precisely the right tools to begin an academic career that does not alienate me from hip-hop culture and my alternative knowledge system that has always been embedded within Afrodiasporic poetics. Woods' critical scholarly interventions exemplify a fruitful way of working with Sylvia Wynter's (1992: 240) notion of deciphering practice - a way of rethinking aesthetic practices in an encompassing way, one that seeks to connect rather than reinstitute the bifurcations of social-material production and cultural production. Wynter's deciphering practice invites an "intercommunion with other texts", and thus provides a way to refuse the seemingly natural ways we are made to believe autonomy exists between texts and discourses. Woods' discursive moves, specifically his implanting of a blues epistemology that is necessarily interconnected to a plantation economy - the savage and uncompromising antecedent of contemporary trap economics and disaster capitalism (see Woods 2009) - moves us *beyond* deconstruction and critical theory (cf. Wynter 1992: 241).

From Woods we learn of the tactics and strategies employed by plantation/trap economics in addition learning of the many ways in which unfreedom and disqualified human lives are naturalized in nefarious rhetoric such as 'looter' (as we recall Katrina). As a hip-hopper, Woods' enactment of the roots of an active deciphering practice within black music provide an intellectual point of departure that takes hip-hop cultures very seriously. Hip-hop's creative energies then can be read as an entrenched philosophic position of resistance to economic exploitation, a socio-political analytic tool that refuses alienating economic-political formations of Reaganomics and other systems of marginalization, a reflection of the governing late-capitalist logic of our moment, as well as an attempt to relocate human value within the creative ethos of the individual.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Because there is another logic by which we might live our present moment, because Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant and Sylvia Wynter have already begun to uncover this logic, the work of the late Clyde Woods remains an indispensable tool, both in its theoretical manifestation as well as its human activist form. For this we will continually critique our governing logic, always represent for the sufferers - the poor and righteous - and never neglect our privilege, power and hence responsibility in the ongoing struggle for better tomorrows.

*“Hardly home, but always reppin’” - from 'Uptown' by Drake featuring Lil Wayne & Bun B (Universal/Young Money, 2009)

References

- Baudrillard J (2006) The pyres of autumn. *New Left Review* 37:5-7
- McKittrick K (2011) On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place. *Social and Cultural Geography* 12(8):947-963
- Muggs J (2005) Should hip hop take the rap for rioting? *The Telegraph* 8 December
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandjazzmusic/3648576/Should-hip-hop-take-the-rap-for-rioting.html> (last accessed 27 November 2012)
- Schofield H (2005) French rapper's prophecies come true. *BBC News* 16 November
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/4440422.stm> (last accessed 27 November 2012)
- Woods C (1998) *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi*

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Delta. New York: Verso

Woods C (2002) Life after death. *The Professional Geographer* 54(1):62-66

Woods C (2007) "Sittin' on top of the world": The challenges of blues and hip hop geography. In

McKittrick K and Woods C (eds) *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (pp46-81).

Toronto: Between the Lines

Woods C (2009) Katrina's world: Blues, Bourbon and the return to the source. *American*

Quarterly 61(3):427-453

Wynter S (1992) Rethinking 'aesthetics': Notes towards a deciphering practice. In Cham M (ed)

Ex-iles: Essays in Caribbean Cinema (pp237-279). Trenton: Africa World Press

Žižek S (2005) Some politically incorrect reflexions on violence in France. *Multitudes*

<http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Some-politically-incorrect.html> (last accessed 27

November 2012)