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**The Sun Never Set Upon The Blues: Reading and Honouring Clyde Woods, November
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Clyde Woods: Life After Black Social Death

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The last time I saw Clyde Woods, in March 2011, at the Critical Ethnic Studies conference in University of California, Riverside, he looked thin, a bit frail. Yet he had a sparkle. He told me he became ill after returning from Haiti the previous year, where he joined post-earthquake solidarity efforts. Recounting his coma, he talked about his brief death as entering an animated, bright party. A large gathering of people he had known and heard of during his life welcomed and celebrated him. He was happy at the party, as he was happy – enchanted – when he described it. Clyde had gone to the death zone and come back. He would shortly go again, this time for good.

Such movement between life and death had been a central aspect of Clyde's work. In 2002, for example, he published 'Life after death' in *The Professional Geographer*. Death framed the last conversation I had with Clyde, not so much as loss but as a constitutive, generative, and therefore central aspect of black life. The discussion I imperfectly retrace here had been about how translatable – if at all – the centrality and experience of death in black life is to non-blacks,

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especially the non-white. The Critical Ethnic Studies conference turned out to be a propitious setting for the conversation.

As I had come to expect, the dialogue with Clyde at Riverside alternated between the humorous and the intensely serious, dystopian and Afrofuturistic. Since 2003, Clyde and I talked on similar occasions, often extending the conversation beyond the formal settings. To someone as averse to academic conferences as I am, I looked forward to hanging out with Clyde. At that last occasion, I sat on a panel he organized about the state of black studies. It was refreshing to interact with a group of black graduate students and mostly young faculty. In that meeting, as in other panels and informal conversations, I noticed the fermentation of a black critique of ethnic studies, black studies, and US social sciences and humanities more generally. The critique, according to my understanding, included aspects of the UC Riverside conference. In what follows, I will elaborate on this critique as it became the focus of the last face-to-face conversation with Clyde. To better appreciate Clyde's position, I will go back to some of his published work.

While Clyde and I agreed there was dissatisfaction among young black graduate students and faculty, we disagreed about the exact nature of the dissatisfaction and on how to redress it. Clyde understood the dissatisfaction as a reaction to white supremacist academia and academic circles in general, and not necessarily linked to that specific UC Riverside conference. As he explained in one of his essays, there existed a series of canonical practices in US academic environments that deemed essentialist, theoretically unfounded, or short-sighted, because too biographically-inflected, the intellectual efforts black researchers undertook to explain the specificities of black experiences. He concluded, "These [canonical] practices, along with the physical isolation from social realities, are just a few of the pillars of white privilege scholarship in the United States" (Woods 2002: 63). According to Clyde, the young black graduate students and faculty voiced

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their grievances against academic dynamics that, in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways, disqualified both their presence and their workⁱ. The 1960s emergence of ethnic studies provided both the necessary conditions and the political inspiration to continue forging analytical frameworks and safe spaces for non-traditional academic production. In that regard, the UC Riverside conference was yet another opportunity to adjust our strategies, share experiences, and continue the necessary counter-hegemonic work. Black academics' grievances were an example of how ethnic studies in general continued to be embattled; the grievances and their analyses provided grounds from which to draw connections and forge alliances with other marginalized intellectual projectsⁱⁱ.

The way I read the dissatisfaction was that it emerged *both* from these canonical practices and from a realization that, to varying degrees, specifically black research and political agendas, in US progressive academic and some key organizing circles, were crowded out by a people-of-color perspectiveⁱⁱⁱ. This crowding-out scenario meant that black experiences, when and if considered relevant, were to be rendered commensurate to that of non-white groups who were potential allies. There was a sense that black experiences had to be made significant within analytical and political agendas that often, if tacitly, diluted the very specificity of such experiences. Common political goals between blacks and non-blacks were presented in this way - as a multiracial (or multiethnic) problem - even though, one could argue, blacks were at the very center of key processes against which political efforts, and their attending analyses, presented themselves. Variations of the people-of-color stance produced agendas that at times suggested little room - even tolerance - for black specificities. 'Black people need to shut up, listen up, and stop complaining' - even though I didn't hear this directly from anyone, iterations on the phrase were presented to me as examples of the type of reaction that an emphasis on black

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life and death produced among a number of progressive, even radical academics, many of who were present at the UC Riverside conference.

Prison abolition was one of the fields where conflicting debates like these took place. Activist and then UC Riverside-graduate student Patrice Douglass, in a panel that both Clyde and I attended, articulated a thoughtful critique of a people-of-color stance within the prison abolition movement. Douglass pointed out some unaddressed analytical and organizational tendencies that prevented a fuller appraisal of anti-black processes within prisons and the prison abolition movement^{iv}. Similarly, Brazilian activist and University of Texas graduate student Luciane Rocha, in another panel, proposed a gendered, black-centered analytical framework to interpret what she characterized as the ongoing genocide against black youths in Brazil^v. White-identified Brazilians in the audience disqualified both her ethnography and her analysis. The critiques leveled against Douglass and Rocha, two young black women, pointed to the alleged analytical and political ineffectiveness of a black-centered perspective. In other words, at their limit, the critiques – not identical, yet linked by a common resistance against specifically black approaches – meant that black suffering and death, as processes informing autonomous theoretical and practical organizing principles, were sources of skepticism and rebuttal. At the very least, the critiques against Douglass and Rocha placed the burden of proof of black relevance on those researchers who were, precisely, focusing on events whose overwhelming negative results impacted the Afrodescended disproportionately. While neither Rocha nor Douglass made a case for the total explanatory power of anti-blackness, they did, however, argue for its uniqueness and importance. So it was the argument for centering anti-blackness that was severely put into question, if not plainly disqualified.

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While the repudiation of the anti-blackness argument was not fully articulated, its diffused manifestations did suggest the accusation of playing 'oppression Olympics'. By emphasizing anti-blackness, those of us interested in the concept would install divisions within the multiracial progressive front; perhaps even worse, our supposedly unwarranted focus on anti-blackness amounted to the unethical attack against and even erasure of the experiences of non-white and non-heteronormative allies. The focus on anti-blackness, besides being cast as analytically myopic, was positioned as morally corrupt^{vi}.

Over the few days of the conference, Clyde and I addressed the different analytical strategies through which to relate black life and death (and black studies) to non-white social processes (and US ethnic studies). We also began to discuss the very logic that informed such analytical strategies. Clyde moved with ease from a focus on black culture and life to a multiracial and multiethnic set of perspectives. Here is where he and I split hairs. I suggested to him that the move had to be scrutinized; and I readily conceded that I had engaged in it without much awareness. My monographs testified to the tendency: after exploring very specific black social life events in different times and spaces of the Diaspora - Los Angeles and Rio de Janeiro in the last 30 years - I concluded my studies more or less the same way, by suggesting analytical and political angles that enabled a multiracial focus. I had presented the multiracial focus, itself a derivation of a people-of-color paradigm, as a powerful stance from which to both deepen the understanding of the social phenomena at hand and render politically viable programs emerging from such black worlds. What could be gained, I asked Clyde, if we lingered a little longer on the analysis of black life (and death) worlds? I didn't have answers; the analytical syncope made the question more intriguing.

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From my perspective, the dialogue with Clyde was far different than a simple critique of ethnic studies and some of the unquestioned principles organizing otherwise progressive and forward looking events such as the UC Riverside conference. It was a self-critique as much as it focused on a seldom articulated, yet almost always utilized, canon of analysis and mobilization. Compounding the challenge of this critique was the fact that the canon came not from conservative or obviously adversarial camps, but from daring and potentially transformative projects. Prison abolition was one of them. The discussion questioned the facility with which many of us academics, often in solidarity with organized movements, transition from a black focus to a people-of-color framework - or approach black life via a people-of-color angle. I wanted to interrupt this seamless transition for I began to find it in need of scrutiny. If anything, this tendency prevented a fuller exploration of black life world specificities - and perhaps even their utter incommensurability vis-à-vis non-black experiences^{vii}. Furthermore, the move away from black life and death prevented a deeper examination of what those very black contexts suggested in terms of investigative strategies and political horizons. It was as if we, otherwise critical and committed researchers, operated under a mostly hidden, hardly questioned, but nevertheless quite powerful orientation that demanded the inclusion of non-blacks in the analysis and in the political solution of the problems. Don't get me wrong, I said to Clyde, I was not defending a black-only focus that, a priori, precluded attention to other negatively racialized and gendered social groups. Nor was this move a negation of the necessary connection between blackness and non-black socialities: such negation is unsustainable from almost any analytical standpoint. Rather, my point was simple: let us render the analysis beyond black formations (of ontology, experience, cognition, politics) a possibility, and not a requirement. Clyde listened patiently and engaged critically.

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Many of us admired Clyde, his work, and his public performance because he was, in a complex and yet direct way, invested in both engaging black lifescapes (that included a recurring discussion about the place of death in them) and advancing theoretical and practical advantages of multiracial and multiethnic alliances. Drawing on his conceptualization of the blues tradition of investigation and interpretation (Woods 1998; 2005), Clyde utilized his version of this imminently black worldview as an effective medium through which to both explicate specificities of black struggles and posit interracial and interethnic collaborations. In Clyde's view, such alliances were not only a political imperative; they resulted from an analytical approach calibrated according to the structural vulnerability black communities experienced paradigmatically. Expanding Achille Mbembe's (2001) writings on the postcolony, Clyde suggested that, in black pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans, "Black Louisianaans have [...] been systematically subjected to some of the worst instances of environmental racism in the world (Woods 2005: 1013). Extreme black social vulnerability (Woods 2005; 2009a; 2009b) and the reach of racial projects that, even though affected blacks disproportionately, also affected non-black non-white communities, made imperative both the multiracial approach and the multiracial political front. Clyde summarized his theoretical and political position as such:

"The construction and reproduction of regional blocs based on alliances that cross race, ethnicity, gender, and class boundaries must be at the center of any study of race. How a dominant power bloc maintains cultural and moral legitimacy, and political and economic hegemony, through racial representation is a subject typically left out of anaesthetized studies of race. Without a thoroughgoing knowledge of the use of race by dominant blocs to restructure communities, regions, and nations, both the dialogue and the solutions offered by such studies are deceptive at best" (Woods 2002: 65).

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Clyde and I were reaching a common ground; to his charges that I was overly pessimistic, I was telling him that, if we were to reach a point where interracial alliances were not, in some troubling ways, averse to recognizing black foundational specificities, then we would have to acknowledge and make central anti-black processes. We mostly agreed on what was specific of the black condition; what we disagreed on was how specific the black condition was vis-à-vis non-white groups, and how to proceed, analytically and politically, from black standpoints.

While rereading some of Clyde's work, and especially his emphasis on (social) life in spite of (social) death, and multiracial alliances in spite of and as a political strategy to address black suffering, it occurred to me that Clyde's work bears interesting commonalities to James Baldwin's writings^{viii}. Clyde and Baldwin were acutely aware, and poignantly described, the pains and pleasures of the black experience. And both ultimately believed in – or at least did not give up on the idea of – America as a salvageable project, one in which blacks would redeem and integrate the polis. Clyde's wisdom was related to his capacity to engage both the here and now and the non-immediate: the there and then not restricted to death and its technologies. In these precious ways, his words resonate and live, and provide a necessary pause: they interrupt and productively challenge the narratives of anti-blackness that can leave us without anywhere to go. Sun Ra, of course, comes to mind as someone who would have plenty more to say about place and space, and perhaps he and Clyde are just chilling in Saturn contemplating this and endless other issues.

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Endnotes

i The parallels with a black diasporic context – Brazil - are startling. In June and July 2012, during a number of sessions during the annual course on 'The Theory and Politics of the Black Diaspora in the Americas' which I coordinate with Black Women's NGO Criola and State University of Rio de Janeiro, UERJ, in Rio de Janeiro, the painful personal testimonies from students who benefited from affirmative action policies and thus entered previously overwhelmingly white academic environments reveal similar antagonisms. White colleagues, professors, and even other black students systematically disqualify black students - including and especially those whose proficiency often surpasses that of non-affirmative action students.

ii A Gramscian orientation, inflected by black diaspora writer-activists such as Frantz Fanon and Stuart Hall, as well as an intimate knowledge of US black historiography, social sciences, literary fiction, and popular culture, especially music, is quite evident throughout Clyde's academic work. His employment of tropes such as power blocs, legitimacy, hegemony, and racial representation, which at first may seem direct application of Gramsci's concepts, need to be placed in Clyde's expansive analytical universe.

iii For an elaboration of the critique of the people-of-color concept, see Sexton (2010: 47-48). People-of-color-blindness, in Sexton's analysis, results from "a common refusal to admit to significant differences of structural position born of discrepant histories between blacks and their political allies, actual or potential". Such blindness, Sexton continues, is "a form of colorblindness inherent to the concept of 'people of color' to the precise extent that it misunderstands the specificity of antiblackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy - thinking (the afterlife of) slavery as a form of exploitation or colonization or a species of racial oppression among others" (2010: 48).

iv For more specific details on Patrice Douglass's insights on radical organizing and blackness, see Sundiata (2011).

v Her arguments were previously elaborated in Rocha (2010).

vi Myopic and morally corrupt: this sums up the criticism I received from an audience member who claimed that, during my talk, as I described juvenile incarceration in Texas by centering anti-blackness, I erased the experiences of Latinos and Indians. I was also told that I seemed angry. Later, colleagues noted that dedicating the talk to Clyde Woods also struck a wrong note among the audience – perhaps, my colleagues suggested, because the acknowledgement involved two supposedly heteronormative

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black males in an otherwise explicitly queer(ing) space. While I find my colleagues' insights correct, I suspect they are only part of the story.

vii The incommensurability of the black experience is compellingly analyzed and defended in the works of Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton. It was interesting to notice how, in spite of Frank Wilderson's absence in the conference, his work was cited in a few panels. It was refreshing to notice young academics trying to make sense of and utilizing what I consider to be one of the most exciting recent theoretical interventions. Together with the works listed below, Wilderson's perspective provides a much-needed reflection on the erasure, or subordination, of the black experience even, and especially troubling in, radical contexts. One does not have to agree with this body of work to recognize the need to engage with it as, at least, a way to continue much needed dialogues about the theoretical and political challenges we face as plural black subjects - plural but nevertheless black and therefore faced with singular ontological and sociological conditions. Wilderson (2010: 58-59) terms 'Afro-pessimism' this body of work and ensemble of perspectives, and explains it like this: "Though they do not form anything as ostentatious as a school of thought, and though their attitudes toward and acknowledgement of Fanon vary, the moniker *Afro-pessimists* neither infringes on their individual differences nor exaggerates their fidelity to a shared set of assumptions. It should be noted that of the Afro-pessimists - Hortense Spillers, Ronald Judy, David Marriott, Saidiya Hartman, Achille Mbembe, Frantz Fanon, Kara Keeling, Jared Sexton, Joy James, Lewis Gordon, George Yancey, and Orlando Patterson - only James and Patterson are social scientists...The Afro-Pessimists are theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon's insistence that, though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world's semantic field - regardless of cultural and national discrepancies - 'leaving', as Fanon would say, 'existence by the wayside' - is sutured by anti-Black solidarity. Unlike the solution-oriented, interest-based, or hybridity-dependent scholarship so fashionable today, Afro-pessimism explores the meanings of Blackness not - in the first instance - as variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor, but as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions; this meaning of noncommunicable because, again, as a position, Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation."

viii Writing to his fictive nephew James on the 100th anniversary of the emancipation, James Baldwin (1998: 294) follows his description of the anti-black logic of social relations with what he presents as the necessary political work. While he addresses white people specifically, his framework lends itself

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to the construction of a multiracial front. He stated: "...we [blacks], with love, shall force our [white] brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. For this is our home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become. It will be hard, James, but you come from sturdy, peasant stock, men who picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads, and, in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity". Perhaps a similar narrative informed Clyde's fine-tuned analytical awareness and his unwavering belief in multiracial alliances. I briefly mentioned to him that this perspective put an immense moral, analytical, and political burden on blacks, not the least of which was the requirement that we unconditionally love the non-black. I am still reflecting about the political subject announced in this Baldwin-Woods type of narrative. Joy James and I recently wrote an essay that offers that a very specific, super-human black being - a black cyborg - animates Baldwin's political interventions.