

# Antipode

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**The Sun Never Set Upon The Blues: Reading and Honouring Clyde Woods, November  
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## **Clyde Woods: From Blues to Hip Hop**

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Those who knew Clyde Woods would acknowledge him as a great friend and colleague. It was often at meetings of the AAG and other conferences that I got an opportunity to know and talk with Clyde about nearly everything under the sun. I will never forget that smile he wore on his face - it was his brand - even smiling as he challenged you on particular ideas about the blues, race, power, and hip hop. I was most struck with his command of local knowledge, whether it was Baltimore, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Chicago, or Birmingham, my home place. On one occasion, he escorted a group of students on a trip throughout the South, stopping in Birmingham where I met him and his students to visit the Civil Rights Institute. As he took his students on a tour of the Institute and Kelly Ingram Park, it was amazing how knowledgeable he was of what took place. In the tradition of geography, he acquired a keen sense of observation that would put any geographer to shame. In his short academic career, he already had taught his readers a great deal about race and power in the South. We surely will miss him.

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Clyde's work began with a critical geography of the Mississippi Delta, and what a beginning - *Development Arrested* (Woods 1998). Clyde understood that things are not what they appear to be. He challenged us to look beneath and beyond the obvious. He took seriously this challenge, peeling back layers and layers of history to expose the power bloc of the Delta. His work on the Mississippi Delta paralleled somewhat my work on Birmingham, *America's Johannesburg* (Wilson 2000). The Mississippi Delta is where the plantation bloc, large scale agricultural capital, and race came together to produce the primary agricultural region in the American south. And east of the Delta in Alabama was Birmingham where large scale industrial capital and race came together to produce the south's primary industrial region. Two different places, yet similar in so many ways. Both relied on the extreme exploitation of black labor. As in the Mississippi Delta, the plantation bloc was also a key player in arresting the development of Birmingham.

The mind of the south was very much continuous with the slave past. John W. Cell (1980) likens this continuity of the south to riders getting on and off the bus, but the bus and the route remain the same. People often mistook the bus stops for the end of the journey, the end of history. For the black working classes in the Mississippi Delta and Birmingham, the emancipation of the slaves was just a bus stop; it was not the end of the route to extreme exploitation and racial oppression on the part of the plantation bloc. Far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was as though time had stood still in the Mississippi Delta. As in slavery, the plantation bloc continued to arrest the social and economic development of the black community.

The lack of development in the Mississippi Delta gave rise to what Clyde referred to as the 'blues epistemology', a black working class voice that captured and preserved every intimate detail of impoverishment and hardship faced by blacks in the Mississippi Delta. Clyde provided his readers with a paradigm to examine communities operating within the blues tradition. While

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social theorists have regressed into the unilateral elevation of the production side of political economy as the site of truth, Clyde took his readers to the cultural side of political economy where he challenged them to know and understand the blues as a cultural form behind the lack of development in the Mississippi Delta. The Mississippi-born novelist, essayist, and social critic, Richard Wright, saw the blues as both a worldview and as a method of perpetually restoring a sense of hope and demand for freedom (Woods 2005).

Following on the heel of the 'blues epistemology' was the talking music of hip hop and rap. For Clyde, hip hop was a continuation of the blues tradition. When it comes to social change, time is not linear; it swings back and forth. Clyde saw both traditions as being closely linked - so closely linked that deficiencies in the study of blues can lead to deficiencies in the study of hip hop as a "blues revival movement": not a "wholly new phenomenon nor a linear extension of the past" (Woods 2005). The blues tradition is the foundation of hip-hop. Clyde explained that their worldviews, methods, and ethics are identical, as are their approaches to realism, spirituality, community development, and social justice. Both traditions give dignity to persons residing in development-arrested places. They provide the very possibility of agency, and are not transcendent or avoidant of social and economic conditions but a means that allows the black working class to cope with its environment in many different situations (Woods 2005). Like the blues, the talking music of hip hop engages the violence, racism, displacement, and vulnerability that came to represent the experiences of development-arrested places. It told the story of New York's postindustrial neglect and exposed the racial profiling and police brutality that accompanied the disappearance of work in development-arrested places. The oldest of the hip-hop generation was already in its early teens when Miami's Liberty City and other development arrested-places exploded in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

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David Harvey (2010: 9) admits that there is no resolute and sufficiently unified anti-capitalist movement that can defeat capital and its perpetuation of power on the world stage. We cannot expect the blues and hip hop traditions to defeat capital. As John Holloway (2010: 9) sees it, “There is absolutely no guarantee of a happy ending...Humanity (in all its senses) jars increasingly with capitalism. It becomes harder and harder to fix as capital demands more and more”. Socialism and communism as solutions have lost their luster in the age of neoliberalism. What Clyde saw in the blues and hip hop traditions was not a struggle to defeat capitalism, but a struggle that jarred increasingly with capital for dignity, to make whole sacred places abandoned by capital. Both traditions insist on representing the dignity and power of people who reside in development-arrested places (see Woods 2005: 22). This may be all we can hope for. For no matter how much one resists or beats on capital, like a vampire it “always rises up again and again after being stabbed to death” (Žižek 2008: 339) - a zombie capitalism, perhaps, “seemingly dead when it comes to achieving human goals and responding to human feeling, but capable of sudden spurts of activities that cause chaos all around” (Harman 2010: 12).

The focus of social change has been to privilege the state as the site of power. This was not the focus of Clyde. Blues and hip hop are not about taking power and forming political parties. Occupy Wall Street, which was inspired by the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East and the protests against austerity in Europe, made the point of not being an instrument for seizing political power (see Faux 2012: 183). It no longer makes sense to think of change in terms of the taking of state power, because the state is territorially limited while capital is not limited territorially (Holloway 2002: 13-18, 168). Capturing power from the state cannot change the world. What is at issue is not who can take power but “how to create a world based on the mutual recognition of human dignity, on the formation of social relations which are not power relations” (Holloway 2002: 17-18). Neither the blues nor the hip hop traditions were about power

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relations. From my reading of Clyde, they are about human dignity, not the taking of power. He saw as much potential for change in the cultural realm as in the realm of politics, which accounts for his strong focus on the blues and hip hop traditions.

There is no longer a single locus of resistance or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead, there is a plurality of resistances. In taking his readers to the cultural side of political economy Clyde turned Marxism on its head, and made the manipulation of cultural mechanism - that which already exists in the daily life of the black working class - the basis of black liberation. Much in black culture continues to remain unknown. The black working class of the Delta refused to accept what the plantation bloc sought to impose on it, identifying other forms of social relations and activities as a basis for survival. The black community made no demands nor was it in opposition to capital; it simply acted in a different world that was already present in the self-activity of the black working class. This different world would be the one you would have if the change you were talking and dreaming about took place. Through his work, Clyde challenged us to start living that way now. Whatever you would do then, do it now. Your struggle would be concrete and practical. Clyde left us with much to think and ponder about as we work to enable learning, participation, and self-determination for those residing in 'development-arrested' places. He blazed a trail for us to follow. It is now up to us to follow this path; but we could never fill the footprints that he left behind in the sand of times.

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