

IN MEMORIAM

Hearing the Community in Its Own Voice

Clyde Woods, 1957–2011

George Lipsitz

When he died in 2011 at the age of fifty-four, Clyde Woods had been our colleague in the Department of Black Studies and at the Center for Black Studies Research at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for only six years. In that all-too-brief interval in an all-too-brief life, Clyde changed each and every one of us profoundly. He showed us why the work we do has meaning, what it takes to do it well, and how much we have to know in order to be people who are capable of doing it successfully, honorably, and ethically. Clyde's all-consuming love *for* and unwavering dedication *to* Black people drew students, colleagues, and community members into his orbit. The conversations and collaborations that he set in motion made us all better. They helped us to find in ourselves and in each other ideas, aspirations, and abilities that we did not know that we had. They enacted what the Black Radical Tradition has always envisioned: the ethos that Cedric Robinson astutely describes as "the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality."¹

In a moving memorial tribute, Clyde's son, Malik Woods, captured the essence of his father's commitment to speaking *from* rather than *for* the Black freedom struggle. Malik relates that

the same sort of people that historians and political theorists attempt to describe but rarely find themselves interacting with were the types of

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people my father was most interested in meeting. He was less concerned about pontificating about a community than he was about being a part of that community. He wanted to know how a community really processed an experience, and he wanted to hear that in their own voice.²

Clyde heard the community speaking in its own voice in many different ways. Through his work with women's health activists in Los Angeles and New Orleans, he learned about the cumulative and intersectional vulnerabilities that Black women face because of lack of access to reproductive health services and information, sanitary housing conditions, educational opportunities, and jobs paying a living wage.³ In the melodies, rhythms, and lyrics of the blues and hip hop music, he found a coherent epistemology forged out of the refusal of unlivable destinies and the struggles for subsistence, survival, resistance, and affirmation.⁴

He discerned in works of expressive culture by Los Angeles filmmakers, musicians, and spoken-word artists proof that the Watts Uprising of 1965 and the citywide insurgency of 1992 provoked a body of creative work that constituted unacknowledged Black Renaissances.⁵ He worked side-by-side with community groups building a grassroots community-controlled library in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and a Mardi Gras Indian museum in New Orleans.⁶ In keeping with the Black radical tradition, Clyde Woods always connected the texts of expressive culture to their social and historical contexts. In his magisterial book *Development Arrested*, for example, he connected the origins of blues music to the withdrawal of northern troops from the South. Noting the coincidence that the color of their uniforms led the Union soldiers to be referred to as the Blues by freed people (in contrast to the Grays of the Confederacy), Woods explained that when the Blues (the soldiers) left, the Blues (the music) arrived on the scene.⁷

From Clyde Woods we learned that race is also a matter of place, and that every place is related to other places as a node in regional, national, and transnational networks. His research illuminated seemingly unexpected relationships. Exploring investment patterns, residential segregation, urban renewal, mass incarceration, surveillance, and neoliberal asset stripping led Woods to connect the poverty of the inner city to the affluence of the suburb, to link the mechanization of the rural South to migration to the industrial North, to recognize the reciprocal relationships that structured the demise of urban social welfare institutions and the rise of rural prisons.

In his exemplary extended analysis of the power of the plantation bloc in Mississippi, Woods revealed how local inequalities and power imbalances produced politics of national and international importance. The unresolved problems of the Mississippi Delta played important roles thousands of miles away from home, influencing everything from the racial makeup of poor populations in Chicago to artificial economic impediments to growing cotton in Burkina Faso in Africa; from subsidies for big business in national politics to the contours

and assumptions behind federal welfare “reform.” Woods’s analysis enables us to see for virtually the first time the literal (rather than merely metaphorical) truth of Martin Luther King Jr.’s observation that an injustice anywhere is an injustice everywhere. In his view, the exploitation and disenfranchisement of Black workers in the Mississippi Delta was not an aberrant local exception to the national norm. Rather, this dangerous imbalance of power created a crucible in which draconian policies, later implemented elsewhere, could be developed and refined.

In his later work, this consistent attention to place enabled Woods to see that the evisceration of the social wage at the local level fueled the accumulation of profits at the global level. He came back to Santa Barbara from his trips to Port-au-Prince and New Orleans with a chilling prophecy. Those cities were not backwaters left behind by modern society, he proclaimed, but rather, as laboratories of neoliberal accumulation by dispossession, they were glimpses into our future. What happens to any of us at one moment can happen to all of us eventually, he argued.⁸

This ability to see a portent of the future in what others discerned to be safely in the past reflects a more general affinity in Woods’s work: his talent for interruption, disruption, inversion, subversion, disguise, and surprise. In his writing, teaching, and activism, Clyde consistently turned hegemony on its head, finding truth in ideas and evidence located 180 degrees opposite of dominant ideas and practices. In *Development Arrested*, Woods demonstrated how Jim Crow segregation in Mississippi, which so often has been described as a local, aberrant, and vestigial remnant of an extinct slave system, was in fact a modern strategy supported by national and transnational elites. It was, he argued, designed to control labor and to disperse and dilute the political power of the population most likely to resist. He documented the dependency of the plantation aristocracy on the federal power that its representatives perpetually decried, a power that subsidized the construction of their levee and rail systems, paid them to leave their land fallow, financed the mechanization of their farms, undermined their international competitors, and marketed their products abroad.⁹

Despite profiting mightily from this largesse, the plantation elite then convinced themselves and much of the nation that they were independent self-reliant producers while the workers whose labor they exploited were dependent parasites. They paid Black workers starvation wages, blocked their opportunities to own land and start businesses, used terror to deny them the franchise, and set up a separate and manifestly unequal educational system designed to protect the privileges of whiteness. These measures then produced the unemployment and homelessness that the elite denounced as vagrancy. They led to the shattered family networks and support systems that the planters then attributed to Black immorality. Woods shows that despite these policies—which in fact produced many of the non-normative behaviors they purported to prevent—Black communities fought back, mobilizing into political and social organizations that

enabled them to survive, maintain their dignity and humanity, and emerge as the nation's foremost champions of democracy.

Similarly, in his work on asset stripping and the neoliberal abandonment of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Woods exposed how old falsehoods still dominate discussions of Black behavior and morality. Having spent time with the Black working class of New Orleans as it struggled for the right to return, the right to rebuild, and the right to democratic determination of its own future, Woods recognized how narratives of monstrous Black misbehavior were merely excuses for white plunder. In a brilliant article in a volume he edited about the struggle in New Orleans, Woods turned the tables on the moralizers and their scolding sermons, proclaiming that “the portrayal of working-class African Americans and their communities as deviant and pathological is the product of a deviant and pathological strain deeply embedded in American thought.” “It is,” he elaborated, “a sickness masquerading as science.”¹⁰ Woods cited sources that revealed that far from being reckless spendthrifts, the poor are forced to pay more for food, shelter, clothing, and other necessities of life; that hunger, illness, police brutality, and mass incarceration function as forms of racial and racist rule. It is not so much that Black people are disadvantaged, Woods explained, but rather that Black people are taken advantage of.

The struggle for a new and better world was here before we arrived, and it will be here long after we are gone. The best we can hope for is to leave the world better than we found it, to pass along to succeeding generations what has been handed down to us. The power of a good example like the life of Clyde Woods means a lot in that work. The beat poet Bob Kaufman once described Charlie Parker as a “great electrician” because the saxophonist “went around wiring people.”¹¹ In his writing, teaching, advising, campus service, and community activism, Clyde Woods had an electrifying effect on those around him. He won the respect, trust, admiration, and affection of working people in ghetto and barrio neighborhoods in a way that very few academics are able to do. His fierce, relentless, and uncompromising insistence on telling the truth prodded scholars, students, philanthropists, government officials, and activists to respect the members of aggrieved communities of color and to learn from them.

Clyde Woods was the same person any time you encountered him. He said the same things in the same ways at the podium at professional meetings that he said in frenzied strategy sessions in ghettos and barrios. Because he spent so much time in communities listening to what people had to say in their own voices, he produced scholarly work of extraordinary import and impact. Perhaps most important, in a world where scholars can be rewarded for writing simply ever-more-eloquent descriptions of other people's suffering, the work of Clyde Woods always gave people meaningful work to do, not just powerful emotions to feel. To borrow a metaphor from 1960s SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) activist Willie Ricks, for Clyde Woods “Mister Do”

was more important than “Mister Say.”¹² In all his work, he was guided by three principles that Malik Woods highlighted in his tribute to his father: *Respect the subject of research, seek the truth, and be mindful of the implications and ramifications of your conclusions.*¹³

Nearly fifty years ago, twenty-one-year-old Fred Hampton contemplated what seemed certain to be, and which soon became, his early death in the struggle. Just a few months before his assassination by the state, Hampton tried to prepare his community for the time when he would no longer be around. “If you ever think about me,” he said, “and you ain’t gonna do no revolutionary act, forget about me. I don’t want myself on your mind if you’re not going to work for the people.”¹⁴ If you think about Clyde Woods, remember that he worked for the people. He walked with them and worked with them. He listened to them and learned from them. Clyde is no longer with us, but his footprints remain, and if you place your feet inside them and walk down his path, he will appear by your side.

NOTES

1. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 171.

2. Malik Woods, “In Memoriam,” in *Black California Dreamin’: The Crises of California’s Black Urban Communities*, ed. Ingrid Banks, Gaye Johnson, George Lipsitz, Ula Taylor, Daniel Widener, and Clyde Woods (Santa Barbara, CA: Center for Black Studies Research, 2012), 16.

3. Clyde Woods, “The Politics of Reproductive Violence: An Interview with Shana Griffin,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2009): 583–591.

4. Clyde Woods, “The Challenges of Blues and Hip Hop Historiography,” *Kalfou*, Inaugural Issue (Spring 2010): 33–54; Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso, 2000), 25–39.

5. “African American Traditions in Southern California” (Santa Barbara: University of California, Santa Barbara, Center for Black Studies Research, Summer 2007).

6. Clyde Woods, “Upholding Community Traditions: An Interview with Cherice Harrison-Nelson,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2009): 639–648; for information on the Bibliothèque du Soleil, see “Projects and Activities: Haiti Projects,” *Center for Black Studies Research*, http://www.research.ucsb.edu/cbs/annualreports/2012/projects_12.html.

7. Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso 2000), 27, 81–82.

8. Author’s notes, Clyde Woods’s closing keynote address, Reimagining the Hemispheric South Conference, January 20, 2011, Santa Barbara, California.

9. George Lipsitz, “Symposium on Woods’s *Development Arrested*,” *Journal of Planning History* 3, no. 3 (2004): 247–248; Woods, *Development Arrested*, 72–154.

10. Clyde Woods, “Les Misérables of New Orleans: Trap Economics and the Asset Stripping Blues,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2009): 771.

11. Bob Kaufman, *Solititudes Crowded with Loneliness* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 12.

12. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 190.

13. Woods, “In Memoriam,” 15.

14. Jeffrey Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010), 4.