

Development Drowned and Reborn

GEOGRAPHIES OF JUSTICE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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Development Drowned and Reborn

THE BLUES AND BOURBON RESTORATIONS
IN POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

CLYDE WOODS

EDITED BY JORDAN T. CAMP
AND LAURA PULIDO

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For Clyde, with gratitude

—Jordan T. Camp and Laura Pulido

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INTRODUCTION

The Dialectics of Bourbonism and the Blues

JORDAN T. CAMP AND LAURA PULIDO

The specific antiracist, democratic, internationalist, African American, and working-class pillars of the sustainable Blues development tradition and the Blues epistemology gave Jazz its aesthetic, freedom ethic, flexibility, and social vision, as well as its political agenda. This allowed the tradition to become central to the efforts of working-class Blacks, Asian Americans, Latinos, whites, and colonized communities to organize newly imagined and real alliances.

Clyde Woods, Development Drowned and Reborn, chapter 3

The death of Clyde Woods in the summer of 2011 robbed the world of one of its most impassioned scholar-activists. While only fifty-four years old when he passed, Woods had earned the respect and admiration of activists, artists, and academics alike for his scholarship on the Blues tradition and political economy, as well as his engagement with antiracist social movements. This dedication and commitment should have earned him a reputation as one of the preeminent Black radical intellectuals of his generation.¹ This study, *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in Post-Katrina New Orleans*, his final major work, represents one of his most distinctive and urgent contributions. Covering over two centuries of political, cultural, and economic development in New Orleans and the region, the bulk of the book focuses on the period between the overthrow of Radical Reconstruction during the 1870s and the Katrina crisis in the 2000s. In doing so, it provides a unique optic for analyzing the historical geography of New Orleans.

The *longue durée* of resistance is a key theme not only in this book but in Woods's larger corpus of scholarship. He sees it as central to the social vision of the Black freedom movement and as a gift to the larger world. In this book Woods takes an especially long view of freedom struggles, which requires the telling of a deep history. *Development Drowned and Reborn* demonstrates that the study of racism and white supremacy cannot be separated from the study of political and economic development, specifically the roles of enclosures, militarism, and policing in containing working-class communities within particular geographical

boundaries in order to facilitate the exploitation of labor and the accumulation of capital and power. Indeed, the present study not only provides what Woods calls a “Blues geography” of New Orleans and the region but also illustrates the dialectical relationship between the regional, national, and global political economies. In doing so, it compels us to reckon with the unfinished business of freedom struggles.²

Reading contemporary policies of abandonment against the grain, this Blues geography explores how long-standing structures of racism and class rule were brought into view during the Katrina events. There are several distinct dimensions to Woods’s Blues geography. First, Woods renders vivid the centrality of New Orleans for understanding the U.S. political economy, reminding us how it has played a major role as a port city in the world capitalist system for centuries. New Orleans was critical to the development not only of the United States but also the larger Caribbean and global capitalism. This brings us to the second dimension of Woods’s Blues geography. He argues that to understand the political, economic, ideological, and geographical relationships between the United States, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the rest of the Global South, one needs to analyze the historical geography of New Orleans and the region. In doing so, Woods suggests that the expressive cultures of Black New Orleans have been critical to U.S. and global popular culture. He draws out a distinct Blues epistemology to powerfully reframe the historical geography of the region. Woods demonstrates that Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath were not a natural disaster. In no uncertain terms, he shows that Katrina was a human-made disaster.³

Though hurricanes have historically been endemic to the city and the region, to call Katrina a “natural disaster” is to relieve ourselves of serious scrutiny regarding the social causes and consequences of the drowning of New Orleans.⁴ Woods argues that the organized abandonment of New Orleans was a planned response to the crisis by elites. While the Mississippi River–Gulf Outlet (a shipping channel), the state of the levees, and the concentration of poor Black people in the Lower Ninth Ward evince varying levels of intentionality, the fact is none were accidental. To understand how these material conditions came into being, Woods encourages us to examine “the disastrous choices that were made to create community, racial, class, and gender destitution in the region” (chapter 7).

Development Drowned and Reborn also makes a distinct contribution to the study of environmental justice, a focus that to this point has been less well appreciated in Woods’s work. Though it is not foregrounded in the text, environmental justice runs as a theme throughout *Development Drowned and Reborn*. While some social scientists continue to debate whether or not racism is actually responsible for the disproportionate burden people of color bear in terms of environmental hazards, the response to Hurricane Katrina provided a whole new level of evidence regarding the salience not only of racism but also of the deliberate and planned nature of vulnerabilities experienced by poor and working-class people of color.⁵ Most centrally, Woods argues that elites have

been and continue to be unrelenting in their efforts to justify impoverishment and immiseration. They do so by consistently organizing to undo whatever political and economic advances labor and social movements may have won. To sustain this argument, Woods traces a deeply rooted racist and authoritarian political project to roll back the redistributive agenda of the state implemented by freedom struggles. By weaving this tight analysis of white supremacy and political economy together Woods provides a historical and geographical analysis of the origins and development of contemporary racial capitalism.

Written in dialogue with urban social movements, *Development Drowned and Reborn* offers tools for comprehending the racist dynamics of political culture and economy in New Orleans and beyond. Here, as in all of his works, Woods turns to organic intellectuals, Blues musicians, and poor and working people to instruct readers in this future-oriented history of struggle. Through this unique optic, Woods delineates a history, methodology, and epistemology to grasp alternative visions of development.⁶

□ □ □

That Clyde Woods wrote about New Orleans and Louisiana is hardly surprising. Clyde had been a student of the South for decades—not only did he think it was key to understanding the experience of Black working people but he also believed that the South was a pivotal region that in many ways drove the United States. In his first book, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (2008), Woods analyzed competing visions of development that were offered for the Mississippi Delta region. Researching these struggles put New Orleans on his radar. Then, after attending Oral History Association meetings and a 2003 Critical Resistance South conference in New Orleans, Woods began developing this study. In 2005 Woods penned a distinct intervention with the publication of “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans? Katrina, Trap Economics, and the Rebirth of the Blues” in the *American Quarterly* (2005), the flagship journal of the American Studies Association. In reflecting on these experiences Woods concluded,

I really felt that I did not know much about Louisiana history. . . . It is sort of a problem we all have with trying to explain U.S. history just from the national perspective, or international flows of capital, or world governance, or national governance, or national flows of capital. . . . It’s like the tail wagging the dog. Despite what people think there are big dogs in Louisiana that have been hunting for a long time, and when you get to Mississippi or Louisiana you’re talking about the storm center of U.S. cultural, economic, and political institutions and transformation at least since the 1830s, and probably before then.⁷

Another reason Woods felt compelled to write this book was because he wanted to offer a longer historical analysis than the concept of “disaster capi-

talism” allowed. In the wake of Katrina, the concept, deployed by Naomi Klein, became a popular tool to describe the exploitation of crises or “disasters” in order to gut social programs and implement neoliberal agendas.⁸ While sympathetic to the radical politics of such a position, Woods felt that as a theory it was limited by a neglect of the history of plantation capitalism. He observed, “Activists in New Orleans were very insistent that there was not just a disaster and people were taking advantage of it, there was a disaster *before* Katrina.” Woods clarified, “New Orleans was the most impoverished metropolitan area in the country. . . . There were disasters throughout Louisiana history that really transformed the United States repeatedly.” His second disagreement with the disaster capitalism thesis was that it places too much emphasis on disasters, rather than the imperatives of regional blocs with deep historical roots. As many scholars have pointed out, it is in the nature of capitalism to produce crisis. It is partly because of Woods’s take on these issues that *Development Drowned and Reborn* begins more than two centuries before Katrina and focuses on the reinvention of spatial and economic dominance in New Orleans and the region well before the storm hit.⁹

It is fitting that *Development Drowned and Reborn* appears in the wake of the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States, since it is a book about multifaceted struggles for freedom. It is a historical geography of racial capitalism and the arts of Black and working-class resistance in New Orleans. For Woods, capitalism is a deeply racialized and spatial system. As in his first book, Woods is extremely attentive to regions. Woods is not only interested in the distinctive nature of New Orleans but also argues that the region’s uneven development agenda contributed to the rise of U.S. neoliberalism. He partly builds this argument by focusing on the role of “regional blocs” in shaping the political economy. By regional blocs Woods means dynamic regional power structures that consist of diverse segments but are united in their efforts to “gain control over resources and over the ideological and distributive institutions governing their allocation.”¹⁰

Development Drowned and Reborn foregrounds a dialectic of Bourbonism and the Blues, by which Woods means a clash between antagonistic social visions of development with opposing material interests. The term *Bourbonism*, which originally referred to an authoritarian regime in France, was later applied to the plantation blocs in several southern states, and the Louisiana cotton and sugar blocs in particular. Following the lead of W. E. B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), Woods illustrates how the overthrow of Radical Reconstruction in the 1870s led to the restoration of power for the “Bourbon bloc.” In Woods’s hands the concept refers to “the extremely hierarchical social philosophy of the dominant regional blocs,” that “led the violent movement to overthrow Reconstruction, disenfranchise Blacks and impoverished whites, and create the institutions of debt peonage and prison slavery” (chapter 2).

The Bourbon bloc in New Orleans—made up of representatives of banks, law firms, and major shipping interests, as well as cotton merchants and financiers—sought to legitimate the accumulation of wealth, the evisceration of civil and human rights, and the consolidation of an authoritarian carceral regime in order to maintain its rule. Woods deploys this concept to help us understand how Black, poor, and working-class communities had been deleteriously impacted by Bourbon political and economic policy well before Katrina hit.¹¹

Through this approach he describes the roots of policies of abandonment and planned shrinkage deployed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. “What the failure of the levees in 2005 revealed,” Woods writes, “was doubly shocking: the restoration of Bourbonism locally; its restoration nationally under the guise of Reaganism, devolution, starve the beast, and so on; and its restoration internationally under the guise of structural adjustment and neoliberalism. These elite responses to social and economic crises have led to a broken region, a broken nation, and a broken world system” (chapter 7). *Development Drowned and Reborn* observes how theories of neoliberalism have tended to overlook New Orleans as an epicenter where racial, class, gender, and regional hierarchies have persisted for centuries. After all, New Orleans was once considered the “Wall Street of the Confederacy,” and as Woods so powerfully put it, “was to become the central shipping, trade, and financial center of a plantation empire encompassing the western territories, the state of California, the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, and Brazil. . . . This movement reflected a dynamic still central to the political economy of the United States: competing regional imperialisms” (chapter 2).¹²

The book, in turn, is attentive to the development of imperial Bourbonism at the national and global scale. It explores how the Bourbon ruling class consolidated a new historical bloc in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction. This bloc produced historically and geographically specific forms of racist social control and labor exploitation such as prisons and sharecropping, which made the region an epicenter of Jim Crow. It sought to win consent to the violent exploitation of labor through appeals to white supremacy. The success of white supremacist ideology and racist practices at both urban and regional scales, Woods contends, provided justification for the expansion of capitalist practices at the national and international scale. These policies were exported around the United States and the world. He traces the circulation of imperial Bourbonism in places such as Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and Africa. As such, this book provides a materialist methodology for interrogating social conflicts between working people and elites across the planet. It offers a model for analyzing antagonistic contradictions between the working-class struggle to redistribute wealth and dominant historical blocs bent on seizing state power, expanding militarism, and accumulating capital.¹³

Woods insists that we wrestle with the long-term structural dynamics of racism and capitalist development in the region. At the same time, however,

he wants us to grapple with neoliberalism as a turning point in the history of capitalism. As such, he contributes an original methodological framework for analyzing the rise of neoliberalism. The book suggests that the prevailing focus on the impacts of neoliberalism at national and global scales has led to a neglect of the regional scale. Specifically, he draws our attention to the formation of a “neo-Bourbon bloc,” which he argues has been planning “a new era of enclosures, traps, and accelerated asset stripping.” He contends that neoliberals consciously sought to roll back the advances of labor and freedom struggles from the civil rights era. This has occurred despite the presence of what he described as “a complex legal regime in the United States to enforce laws against racial discrimination.” He powerfully shows how neoliberals have engaged in the stripping away of social and economic rights by constructing “asset stripping enclosure institutions.” These enclosure institutions have led to historic levels of racial inequality, structural unemployment, and poverty, and have made New Orleans the most carceral city in the state, with the highest rates of incarceration in the country and the world. According to Woods, the formation of this carceral apparatus was a key feature of a neoliberal enclosure movement, which maintained “a system of militarized regulation, physical boundaries, and social, political, and economic traps.” This form of what he called “trap economics” extracts wealth from the racially subordinated poor and working class by privatizing social goods formerly held in common, such as public schools, hospitals, housing, transit, and parks, and increasing expenditures for policing and prisons.¹⁴

Finally, the book explores the ethical possibilities for a new society articulated in the “Blues epistemology.” Here Woods means the philosophy of development that has been expressed in the cultural productions of Black working-class organic intellectuals since at least the Civil War and Reconstruction. According to Woods, the Blues epistemology is a way of knowing rooted in the historic redistributive agenda of freedom and labor struggles. He argues that this epistemology has inspired the efforts of the Black, Native American, Asian American, Latina/o, and white working-class communities in the city to organize multi-racial political alliances in a broad struggle for social and economic justice.¹⁵

As Woods demonstrated in *Development Arrested*, Blues traditions have provided epistemological, philosophical, theoretical, and political alternatives to the dominant ideologies of development. His original and generative contribution to scholarship shifted how we understand the role of Blues music, literature, and poetry in social movements. He explored how the development of the Blues occurred in the context of the violent overthrow of Radical Reconstruction. In turn, he examined how Blues music became a key terrain of ideological struggle. He conceptualized Blues artists, performers, and musicians as “organic intellectuals,” that is, intellectuals who articulate the values and interests of their class. In this way, Woods suggests that the Blues should be read not as “mechanistic

responses to oppression” but instead as an ethical vision that can be drawn upon in a struggle for a multiracial working-class democracy. This is what Woods means by his concept of the Blues tradition, which he defines as “the break-up of racial and economic monopolies; the economic redistribution of monopolized resources to oppressed and working-class communities; the creation of sustainable communities; the full recognition of human rights; and the affirmation of Black culture and intellectual traditions” (chapter 8). The Blues tradition refers to the countless ways that the working-class has struggled to survive while making its communities and the larger world more livable and just.¹⁶

As Woods explains in his first book, the concept of the Blues epistemology was grasped by the essayist, artist, and organic intellectual Richard Wright in a famous essay entitled “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” which was first published in *New Challenge* (1937), a communist literary publication of the Popular Front era. Born in Mississippi, Wright was part of the great migration of Black workers to Chicago during the early twentieth century. It was there that he became one of the most influential writers on the Black Left during the Great Depression. In particular, he first achieved literary influence as a member of the Communist Party, where he was an active member in Chicago’s John Reed Clubs and had published his work in communist outlets since the early 1930s. During this period Black artists, activists, and intellectuals including Wright, Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, and others were influenced by the Communist Party’s thesis on the right to self-determination for the Black Belt. The Communist Party had also garnered respect for its organizing among the Black working-class defendants known as the “Scottsboro boys” in Alabama, industrial workers in factories, and the unemployed and homeless in cities during the early years of the Great Depression. The Communist Party earned a reputation for militancy by combining an antiracist struggle against the Jim Crow police state with a Marxist commitment to organizing the working class. In “Blueprint” Wright argued that Black writers should tap Black working-class vernacular traditions in their expressive work, as working people provided a distinct social vision that challenged the ideology of leadership articulated by the petty bourgeoisie. The task for writers on the Black Left was to engage with expressive culture, such as Blues and Jazz, which articulate the perspective of the working class in a struggle against racism, capitalism, and U.S. imperialism.¹⁷

Following this lead, Woods explores the foundations of the Blues epistemology. In his analysis the Blues epistemology was revitalized during the radical 1930s to insist on working-class consciousness and union-based leadership in the freedom struggle. While many analyses of the civil rights movement begin in the aftermath of World War II, Woods traces its roots in campaigns waged by organizations including the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and the National Maritime Union in the 1930s. The formation of these unions “signaled the rise of union-based

working-class leadership at the expense of the old-line Black commercial and professional elite.” By linking directly with the struggles of the industrial working class, these organizations addressed “voting rights, police brutality, racial discrimination, and labor organizing.” In doing so, Woods suggests, they revived a Blues agenda that challenged “elite Black leadership organizations” and demonstrated how “the ability of the middle class to symbolically claim leadership was rapidly diminishing” (chapter 5).

As Woods explains in the epigraph, the Blues epistemology provided Jazz with its politics and aesthetics. By the Great Depression of the 1930s the Blues had achieved a global audience and influenced the “jazz revolution in New Orleans.” Woods shows how these cultural practices have been tapped in mobilizing many different working-class and colonized communities. Indeed, a central insight of the book is based on the lessons that can be learned from the history of internationalism and multiethnic alliances in the present. This is especially true, as the reader will see, in terms of the history of indigenous people’s struggle. Woods spends considerable energy examining the *longue durée* of resistance and affirmation among African American and indigenous peoples. Not only are they central to the history of New Orleans, but they also illuminate the breadth of white supremacy.¹⁸ Woods was deeply committed to interracial cooperation among people of color and was always alert to moments of working-class solidarity.¹⁹ As Woods noted, Dr. Martin Luther King came to understand this dynamic in the last year of his life as he called for a “general strike” of workers and for the building of the Poor People’s Campaign to redistribute wealth to African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and poor whites.²⁰

Woods shows how organic intellectuals in New Orleans have promoted “working class leadership, social vision, sustainable communities, social justice, and the construction of a new commons.”²¹ “The Blues,” Woods writes, “is an encyclopedia of the multiple forms of traps experienced by African Americans . . . and of how they challenged these practices.”²² He traces a continuity in the Blues tradition from musicians like the Mardi Gras Indians, Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson, Professor Longhair, Jelly Roll Morton, “Blind” Willie Johnson, and Kidd Jordan to radical intellectuals and artists, including W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, to social movement organizations, including the radical National Negro Congress, the Southern Negro Youth Congress, and the Civil Rights Congress between the 1930s and the 1950s, to the Deacons for Defense and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s and 1970s, to struggles in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In developing this tradition these organic intellectuals, artists, and activists have, according to Woods, articulated the “global significance of the working-class, multiethnic alliance created on the streets of New Orleans” (chapter 2).

Woods instructs his readers to regard the current monograph in the tradition of his earlier book. “Some students considered my first book, *Develop-*

ment Arrested, as an obituary for forgotten African American communities and movements that expired at the hands of an ever-expanding plantation regime,” Woods writes. “Many also accepted this historic collapse as inevitable and almost natural. They felt defenseless before political and economic forces that were enclosing their communities, and they imagined rural Black communities to be either more passive than they were or more heroic than they could become.” The crises unleashed by neoliberalism in poor and Black communities across the country, he explains, led some to cynically believe that “since class was the determinant of success, as future members of the middle class they had no inherent responsibility to improve conditions faced by the Black working class.” Yet he believed in the moral and ethical responsibility to confront the pervasive and persistent problems of racism and poverty in rural and urban spaces. He argues that a “cynical reading” of *Development Arrested* “ignores the most important arguments undergirding the work. First, hegemonic blocs face crises, both short-term and prolonged, more commonly than is typically understood. Second, the African American working-class traditions of resistance, affirmation, and development were also expanding” (chapter 8). In Woods’s own words, “reports of the death of African American communities were premature.”²³

We believe *Development Drowned and Reborn* can help us in the search for new theoretical and methodological approaches for analyzing the past, historicizing the present, and articulating different futures. It conveys the politics of such scholarly work in the present neoliberal moment and articulates its relationship to the struggle for global justice.²⁴ While there will certainly be resistance from above to social movements, this book shows that there is also a memory of the Reconstruction agenda to draw upon in the struggle for a new society. As Clyde Woods put it, “We stand at the dawn of a new era of ethnic and social justice. The voices straining to be heard are legion, and our potential contribution is immense.”²⁵