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Geographies of Resistance Within the Black Belt South

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The Black Belt South is a strategically unacknowledged racialized space. Current framing and discourses describing the region continue to “naturalize . . . poor and black agony and distress” (McKittrick and Woods 2007, p 2). Yet, communities in the region have strong traditions of resilient responses to social, political, economic and cultural oppressions (Woods 1998). In this article we draw upon frames from the emerging field of Black geographies to gain insight into the narrative of a recent movement, the Black Belt Initiative (BBI), within the Black Belt South, to understand the tensions, struggles, political resistances and triumphs accompanying the ongoing production of Black geographical spaces that affirm humanness and community.

El Cinturón Negro del Sur es un espacio racializada estratégicamente inadvertido. Encuadres actuales y discursos que describen la región siguen “naturalizando . . . agonía y angustia del pobre y negro” (McKittrick y Woods 2007, 2). Sin embargo, las comunidades de la región tienen una fuerte tradición de respuestas flexibles a las opresiones sociales, políticas, económicas y culturales (Woods 1998). En este artículo nos basamos en los marcos del campo emergente de las geografías del Negro para obtener una perspectiva de la narración de un movimiento reciente, la Iniciativa de Cinturón Negro (BBI), dentro del Cinturón Negro del Sur, para entender las tensiones, luchas, la

resistencia política y triunfos que acompaña a la producción continua de espacios geográficos negros que afirman lo humano y de la comunidad.

KEY WORDS: Black Belt South, Regional Commission, Poverty, Race, Black Geographies, Uneven Development

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cinturón Negro del Sur, de la Comisión Regional, la pobreza, la raza, geografías del Negro

INTRODUCTION: DEVELOPMENT ARRESTED IN THE BLACK BELT SOUTH

In 1998, the late Clyde Woods gave us incisive analytical tools for deconstructing discourses framed for deploying economic development efforts in the U.S. South with his book, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*. Specifically, we learned through his case study of the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission (LMDDC) how the structure of the plantation bloc “(the) economic and political dynasties of the South which preserved and reproduced themselves through diversification and through numerous new mobilizations,” (Woods 1998) is remobilized through

modern development agencies, their practices and discourses. Woods (1998, p 1) contends that:

The establishment of the LMDDC marked the beginning of a new era for the poorest and most heavily African American region in the United States. The official goal of the commission was to design a development plan to eliminate the most profound features of economic exhaustion and human desperation. Yet the social origins, organizational practices, and public policies of the LMDDC ensured that the people of the seven-state Delta region would remain mired in a seemingly bottomless state of crisis.

By carefully examining the discursive bureaucratic practices of the dominant plantation bloc, Woods "disclose(d) how the racialized production of space is made possible in the explicit demarcations of the space of *les damnes* as invisible/forgettable at the same time as the invisible/forgettable is producing space-always, and in all sorts of ways," (McKittrick and Woods 2007, p 4). By guiding attention to the dialectic of creative possibilities for liberation emerging from the ostensibly closed demarcations of the plantation bloc, Woods affirms "a new transformative crisis generated by the countermobilizations of the region's African American, Native American, and poor White communities" (1998, p 2).

In this essay we discuss and analyze the unfolding of a counter mobilization (movement), the Black Belt Initiative (BBI) within the Black Belt South, in response to efforts by politicians, academics and others to lay the groundwork for a Black Belt Regional Commission. Arguably, some of these key players were influenced by the impulses of

deeply embedded plantation-based power relations. Through this essay we contribute additional empirical support, by drawing on information from key informants and programmatic and legislative documents, for Woods' 1998 groundbreaking work. We do this in tandem with other interpretive frames, i.e. (McKittrick and Woods 2007; Saldanha 2007; Delaney 1998) from the emerging field of Black geographies. Black geographies have opened up vibrant re-imaginings for understanding the "racialized production of space." Most importantly Black geographies provide for, "understandings of spatial liberation and other emancipatory strategies," (McKittrick and Woods 2007, p 5). With the introduction of a cast of actors i.e., historically black and white land-grant universities and community based organizations, we provide a chronology of the BBI movement's unfolding as it faced consistent resistance, bureaucratic control and delegitimizing strategies.

We begin with background on the Black Belt South, a historically racialized space where the movement, the Black Belt Initiative (BBI), was formed and carried out its work. This section is followed by a discussion of the impetus for the creation of a Black Belt Regional Commission in 2002, followed by the chronology of the emergence and work of the BBI. We conclude with reflections on the engagement of the Black Belt Initiative with Black geographies.

BACKGROUND: SOUTHERN BLACK BELT REGION

The Black Belt region within the Southern U.S. stretches across the heart of the old plantation South, from eastern Texas to Virginia, covering portions of Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, West Tennessee,

Alabama, North and South Carolina, Georgia and North Florida. The Black Belt is home to 34 percent of the nation's population living in poverty and 43 percent of the rural poor (Wimberley 2008). As a clear reflection of slave-plantation social, political and economic legacies, the Black Belt is home to 46 percent of all African Americans, 83 percent of the non-metropolitan African American population and 90 percent of poor rural African Americans (Wimberley 2008). These statistics are charted onto maps in dark red ink to contrast with the orange, yellow and white "better" spaces that are not the Black Belt counties. These maps are produced by universities in the region and are often accompanied by text describing a litany of deficits such as poor health status and low educational attainment. While helpful in identifying persistent historical trends that challenge sustainable well-being, without accompanying, situated counter narratives proffered by communities in the sub-region, these partial perspectives are examples of what Katherine McKitterick describes as, "the colonial enactment (s) of geographic knowledge" that "map . . . 'a normal way of life' through measuring different degrees of humanness and attach . . . different versions of the human to different places" (2013, pp 6–7). This colonial enactment of geographical mapping onto geographical knowledge infused the initial impetus for the creation of a Black Belt Regional Commission.

THE ERASURE OF BLACKNESS:
CREATING A BLACK BELT
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT
COMMISSION

In 2002, the University of Georgia, with the financial support of Senator

Zell Miller and timber man Benjy Griffith, set an agenda to assess the feasibility of establishing a Black Belt Regional Commission. This commission was to be similar in structure and mission to that of the Appalachian Regional Commission established over thirty years ago to address persistent poverty and its consequences within Central Appalachia (Carl Vinson Institute of Government, University of Georgia 2002).

One of the stipulations made by Senator Miller in granting money to the University of Georgia for the feasibility study was that poverty, not race, be the guiding principle. As the earlier discussion of the demographic profile of the region makes clear, approaching the study in this way reflected a long established way of constructing the region by subverting its history and decontextualizing the intersecting dynamic forces – gender, race, class, racism, sexism, spatial exploitation/dislocation and so forth—that play ongoing roles in shaping and reshaping the region. This is an unambiguous example of geographic exclusion that succeeds in shaping and deploying racial erasure discourses with profound policy, political and material-survival consequences.

The University of Georgia (UGA) originally set out to accomplish this on its own, with a focus on gathering information from government officials, people in the business community, academics and politicians. Only belatedly and as a result of considerable insistence did the University of Georgia concede that a historically black institution, Tuskegee University (Tuskegee), had an extensive knowledge base for informing the development of a regional commission because of its deeply rooted historical experience with

communities in the Black Belt. Moreover, Tuskegee had developed a collaborative model of engagement in the mid-1990s, the Southern Food Systems Education Consortium (SOFSEC), to bring historically black land grant institutions into partnership with public schools and community-based institutions to address challenges faced by communities in the region (Southern Food Systems Education Consortium 2003).

Tuskegee shared its desire to expand and employ this structure as a resource in developing a methodology that would increase input from community members in the decision-making process regarding the structure and mission of a regional commission. UGA pushed back against an approach that would include community people, but conceded a sub-contract to Tuskegee that allowed it to do so. Tuskegee then moved to encourage the partnering of other historically black universities with community-based organizations in developing methodologies for gathering information on ideas for a regional commission from community people. These partnerships across counties in seven Black Belt states – Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia – gave rise to a movement that opened spaces for the profound expression of the lived experiences of people within Black Belt communities. Because the organizational frame brought people together across communities and across state boundaries, Black geographies were reimagined in profound ways giving form over time to an ambitious and enthusiastic movement, the Black Belt Initiative, to speak truth to power.

THE MOVEMENT: MOBILIZED RESISTANCE: THE BLACK BELT INITIATIVE

The BBI was born as an act of resistance to a data gathering process that disregarded the presence of the community voice – the black voice – the black experience in shaping ideas for a Black Belt Regional Commission. The act of resistance came primarily in the form of Black Belt communities working in collaboration with regional universities in formulating approaches that would foreground the community voice in determining how a regional commission would be designed and operated to address the conditions and consequences of persistent poverty.

Based on the community-based, participatory approach to gathering the data, the BBI forcefully made its case for a regional commission that would address education, healthcare, housing and other human resource concerns that had been systematically ignored historically. Nevertheless, even in the case of the BBI mobilization, material and discursive practices were deployed to undermine the community-based agenda. The most distinctive challenge that the BBI posed to resisting these practices was specifying that the “peoples” regional commission include a community constituency board made up of the people from the persistent poverty communities that the commission was designed to serve. It also specified that allocations for infrastructure development be capped at 25 percent (Southern Food Systems Education Consortium 2003).

These are the broad contours of the BBI mobilization. Nevertheless, it is clear

from this description that the BBI illuminates neo-plantation struggles that persist in denying Black geographies and the possibilities for emancipatory maneuver. The plantation schema in particular provides incisive ways, “to think about a range of difficult struggles,” within the heart of the historical slave plantation region “in recast(ing) the politics of resistance.” (McKittrick 2013, p 4; 11).

Employing Black geographies we call attention in particular to the uneasy trajectories, tensions and contestations between historically black and white land grant institutions. In this regard black and white land grant institutions are distinctly political institutions bonded in struggle, in this case within the Black geographical space of the Black Belt South. They were established by respective legislative acts and charged with distinctive socio-educational imperatives at pivotal junctures during the agrarian/industrial transformations taking place in the U.S. By design they work within a stratified bureaucracy where resources and decision-making powers are allocated at significantly greater levels to white land grant institutions, resulting in continuous tensions and conflicts (Harris 1990). And by design they are currently positioned to reproduce the dynamics and profitability of neo-plantation social relationships (Hightower 1973). This is not surprising as Delaney (1998), argues that Black-slave spaces are embedded within and in turn give shape to geographies of power and experiences driven and enforced by legal codes/legal landscapes such as the legislation creating historically black land grant institutions in 1890, accommodating the separate-but-equal prescriptives of Jim Crow.

However, the material and epistemic legacies of black land grant institutions indicate an early, embedded stream of practices consonant with the needs of a “liberated” but much beleaguered people (Harris 1990). Creative, innovative, cooperative, collective practices that optimized the use of limited resources predominated. These denied/hidden histories of resourcefulness and resilience resonate with the observation of Woods that, “(d)espite having little material resources with which to work, African Americans have constructed one of the most vital cultures on the planet,” (2002, p 65). Emerging from these vital cultures are critical epistemologies and counter-narratives. These are the visceral-incisive storied renderings from the everyday, lifeworld struggles of African Americans, their communities and institutions, as they encounter the ever morphing, dehumanizing and often deadly practices of the racist power structure within the U.S. The people of the BBI, with the guiding hand of Tuskegee pushed back against these deadly practices through collaborative – re-spatialized power relationships, formed from partnerships, participatory story-gathering and story-sharing and plans to strategically influence the policies that would impact their lives.

CONTESTED APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT: UGA AND TUSKEGEE

As the Black Belt Initiative unfolded, distinctive patterns emerged as the institutions worked with their respective approaches to engagement. As discussed earlier, Tuskegee focused primarily on

gathering information for shaping the concept for a regional commission from community people and community-based organizations. While the University of Georgia included community-based organizations in its data collection matrix, it focused primarily on gathering information from small businesses, large corporations, state agencies, Governors' offices and so forth.

Working in this vein, Tuskegee approached work with communities to understand the lived experiences and intentional responses of local people to the challenges they face in their communities. This approach respected local residents' own capacities to influence the fates of their communities through local activism and effective voice. In essence, Tuskegee worked in partnership with communities to open space for emancipatory strategies. As a result, recommendations for a very different governance structure for a Black Belt Regional Commission emerged from the community-focused approach taken by Tuskegee than the one recommended by the University of Georgia. In the end UGA chose not to include the data compiled by Tuskegee in its report (Carl Vinson Institute of Government 2002). This resulted in Tuskegee writing its own report (Southern Food Systems Education Consortium and Community-Based Organizations (SOFSEC) 2003).

The following discussion contrasts the approaches taken by Tuskegee and UGA regarding priorities to be addressed within the region and recommendations on the form that a regional commission should take. The discussion concludes by summarizing the varying policy initiatives

resulting from the different approaches taken by the institutions.

OUTCOMES FROM CONTESTED APPROACHES

Tuskegee University's community-based approach was built upon the historical momentum of social justice and activist legacies. Recommendations from the research carried out under its auspices were translated into legislation by Representative Arthur Davis, 7th District – Alabama. The legislation, H.R. 678: the Southern Empowerment and Economic Development (SEED) Act, introduced in 2003 provided for the creation of the Delta Black Belt Regional Authority (DBRA) combining coverage for persistently poor counties in both the Black Belt and Mississippi Delta. What really distinguished this legislation and dramatically reflected the impacts of the community-based participation that had generated the ideas for the legislation were provisions mandating the formation of a Community Constituency Board made up of residents in distressed communities. The Board was provided with the discretionary power to allocate 20 percent of DBRA funds to the priorities they regarded as important such as education, housing and health care. Funding for infrastructure development, the darling of the plantation bloc, was capped at 25 percent.

In contrast, recommendations from UGA's report were translated into legislation by Senator Zell Miller who introduced S. 527 in the Senate, and Congressman Mike McIntyre of North Carolina who introduced H.R. 3618 in the House. Both pieces of legislation called for establishing a regional commission very similar to the

Appalachian Regional Commission where Governors, representatives from the business community, academia and so forth are the major decision-makers and the majority of funding is allocated to infrastructure development.

These bills were not passed, although legislation for establishing a commission continued to be introduced between 2003 and 2008. In all, twelve House and Senate Bills were introduced to establish a commission. By 2008 sections of a number of the bills were included in the 2008 Farm Bill and a commission was authorized. The commission is authorized in sections 15101, 15301, and 15731 of the “Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 (Farm Bill),” and is titled, “The Southeast Crescent Regional Commission.” In Section 15731 of the Farm Bill it specifies that the commission include all the counties of Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida, but excludes counties covered by the Appalachian Regional Commission or the Delta Regional Authority. Specifically, “(t)he Appalachian Regional Commission already serves some of the counties bordering Appalachia in all of these states but Florida. The Delta Regional Authority serves many Mississippi Delta counties plus several from Alabama that, of course, are not a part of the river delta,” (Wimberley, Morris and Harris 2014).

Similar to the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission appoints a federal co-chairperson as well as an alternate federal co-chairperson, a state co-chairperson who is a governor of one of the participating states, the governors of the participating states or their designees, and

an executive director (Section 15301). The decision-making structure provided that policy would be set by votes of the federal co-chair and a majority of the state members (Section 15302), (Wimberley, Morris and Harris 2014).

Originally \$30 million was allocated for years 2008 through 2012 (Section 15751). However, a federal co-chair has not been appointed since the commission was legislated. Oddly, each year the Senate approves a \$250,000 budget allocation even though there are no commission members to mobilize the funds. It would seem that the work of the commission has been doomed to an abstract federal treasury account.

DISCUSSION: THE BLACK BELT INITIATIVE AND BLACK GEOGRAPHIES

Following Clyde Wood’s analysis of the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission it is clear from the case of the BBI that, regional development commissions exist in a liminal space—where places are overlapped in the ink of polymorphous federal economic (re)development initiatives. Each strategy promises economic recovery. Like a continuous rewrite of post-Civil War reconstruction discourses, each strategy promises economic recovery. A basic question is: recovery from what? A dominant needs-based development discourse conditions a narrative that hides anti-black violence to “avoid any discussion of the relationship between race and poverty,” (Woods 1998, p 255). Thus, the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission proffers a narrow solution that obscures contestations over whose knowledge and experiences are heard.

Considering the present stasis of the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission it appears that it has been forgotten, misplaced and lodged under a pile of abstract federal authorities. After the seed money had been spent and the report submitted, the various actors that compiled the knowledge are now represented as being hauntingly silent. The dis-engagement of institutions and faculty once the funding was exhausted and the obligatory report written, without including the community knowledge gathered by Tuskegee, reveals the stealth of epistemic violence. Black geographies are not taken seriously by the bureaucracies embedded within the neo-plantation system.

Nevertheless, the field of Black geography helps us to pause at such junctures for deeper consideration of alternate possibilities. In Wood's 1998 study this pause allowed him to realize the resilience of Black Belt souls and the possibilities for counter narratives and liberatory possibilities through his finely nuanced analysis of the blues as critical epistemology, counter-narrative and resistance. This reading of the blues is gripping, powerful and surprising—the blues as haunting melody and sad lyrics. Yet, as with the drum song on plantations, telegraphing the call for escape or rebellion, the blues can be read as situating the power to interpret and communicate story, experience, action and liberation with those othered as *les damnes*.

In the case of the Black Belt Initiative, the pause was at that juncture where Tuskegee asserted the importance of the community voice and then moved to facilitate the coming together of Black bodies in space to emote, articulate, name and move together for transformation. What

Saldanha maintains, “isn’t done by individual minds, but corporeally, in interaction” (2007, p 9). He captures this concept with the term *viscosity*. Viscosity explains why, for instance, common histories and experiences of oppression, brutality and insecurity shape the aggregate—not just in terms of thought, but in terms of physical cohesion and movement. Bodies are entangled energetically – kinetically. This holding together makes both inclusion and exclusion much more forceful and impactful. By sharing stories of lives lived before their time; lives lived in their time; and their hopes for lives to come; across communities and across states, BBI participants, “reconfigure(d) classificatory spatial practices,” (McKittrick and Woods 2007, p 5). Thus they reimaged space, less as the Western concept of territory and more as the province of space for healing, transformation – liberation. This reimagining is a dramatic and strategic cultural turn where, “region is not a thing so much as a cultural history, an ongoing rhetorical and poetic construction” (Powell 2009, p 6). The fluidity and openings such a conception of region offers enjoins the emancipatory possibilities of Black geographies. Woods concludes that the blues epistemology and other forms of expressive cultural resistance, “offer an unapologetic celebration of life, resistance, spiritual affirmation, community, social and humanity, and the highest levels, the ‘upper rooms’ of African American culture and philosophy,” (Woods 1998, p 20).

Just through its unfolding, the BBI offered “an unapologetic celebration of life . . .” The rich, dialogue-centered methodology employed by the BBI brought together folk from within their

communities and from across the region to celebrate history, life and possibilities through deep story-telling and testimonials. These spirit-filled, humanity-affirming rituals taking place locally and trans-locally helped to give form to creative-poetic frameworks for a Black Belt regional commission with the community voice at the forefront shaping policy. Though not enacted as legislation – the ideas engendered by the BBI live on as bold epistemology and resistance to live ultimately, in many and varied forms.

CONCLUSION

As a Black geographical space, the Black Belt South has been subjected to the commissions and omissions of state and federal policies illuminating that, “. . . black and poor subjects are disposable precisely because they cannot easily move or escape,” (McKittrick and Woods 2007, p 3). However, the deep, rich history of counter-movements and mobilizations that include slave uprisings, the Underground Railroad, bi-racial populist farmers’ movements, the 1960s Civil Rights movement and the Black Belt Initiative evidence a capacity for agency and transformation that defy the motley discourses of those who would argue that the Black Belt is nothing more than a region to be used to exploit conditions of poverty and lack of education. While these discursive-material aggressions make concealment and even marginalization “happen,” they are in fact constructions that can be interrogated, interrupted and deconstructed through the insurgence of counter narratives and counter-movements that play out in the everyday worlds of communities within the Black Belt.

In this paper we have engaged the emerging Black geographies scholarship to proceed with these interrogations, interruptions, deconstructions in the case of the Black Belt Initiative. We pursued this in order to understand how the discursive and material rendering of the Black Belt as an un-geographical, unknowable space historically has at once given way to horrific violence, struggles against tremendous difficulties and openings for resistance and liberation. This engagement with the field of Black geographies has both widened our conceptual lens and deepened our understanding of the hegemonic impact of spaces/people historically rendered “un-geographic.” The analytical guidance provided in the works of McKittrick, Woods and others has helped us to see how deftly Black spaces have been made to disappear historically. And how through the processes of going deep, to listen and then tell the story, they are opened up and made knowable. In addition to future interrogations along these lines we close by making a number of suggestions for employing Black geographies in liberatory undertakings from start to finish. For this we turn to the emerging field of counter-mapping.

Maps, whether conceptual or spatial representational tools have the power to frame a narrative; establish cause and effect; say what *counts as data* and persuade through design and symbology (Crampton 2010). Therefore, a resistance movement could reclaim power through counter-mapping- or speaking truth to power through their own stories; rationales; data and symbols. We imagine counter-mapping activities could provide opportunities for those living in dark-red inked municipalities to tell their own creative

stories about their place, thus, opening the space for more liberatory spatial practices.

Also, attempting to follow McKittrick's interpretation of Sylvia Wynter's 'plot-and-plantation,' we would like to give life to a new knowledge system, "produced outside the realms of normalcy. . .and in this envisions not a purely oppositional narrative but rather a future where a correlated human species perspective is honored" (2001, p 11). This knowledge system or "decolonial poetics," (McKittrick 2013, p 14) may offer ways of forcing us to consider expressive texts which move beyond positivist, statistical report making that catalogue black diasporic death.

An example we offer is a report/story-telling/call to action hybrid document published in 2014 called: *Shining a Light in Dark Places: Raising up the Work of Southern Women of Color in the Food System* by Shorlette Ammons (Center for Social Inclusion). This work opens up a new discursive space in the performance of food system narratives in the South by highlighting real life stories of people of color doing the work of food justice every day. First, it dismisses a dominant narrative that attempts to distance African-Americans from farmland by prescribing the experience of farming as a violent act within all black memories. Instead, connection to land is emphasized through stories of people mobilizing their communities against food violence. Next, these grassroots narratives are activated through a counter-imagination of community development centered on active organizing rather than static infrastructure investments. Recommendations based on life rather than death are revealed as they impassion and empower the reader. This is just another example of active

resistance to the dominant development discourse within the Black Belt South. They are multiple and vibrant—and cannot be maintained as invisible. Such work demonstrates the praxis power of Black geographies.

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