

BOOK REVIEWS

Chronicling Stankonia: The Rise of the Hip-Hop South

By Regina N. Bradley. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

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Although scholars recognize the U.S. South as the most influential region for hip-hop music today, there remains a dearth of academic work on it.¹ Regina N. Bradley's *Chronicling Stankonia: The Rise of the Hip-Hop South* helps to fill that gap, to be sure; it contributes to the growing, and yet still deeply insufficient, number of histories of hip-hop in the South, such as those by journalists Roni Sarig, Ben Westhoff, and Briana Younger.² However the book does far more than narrate a vital strand of the history of southern hip-hop: Its analysis of music, literature, and audiovisual media makes clear the centrality of hip-hop in contemporary Black life in the U.S. South. In Bradley's study, hip-hop does not just function as a musical genre, it becomes a way to understand Black Southern identity after the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century.

The book's interrogation of the cultural possibilities for the contemporary Black American South begins by acknowledging the absence of academic work in this area. As Bradley notes, scholarship on post-civil rights Black culture rarely focuses on the South, and popular representations of it all too often center the experiences of white southerners, with Black narratives typically confined to three historical moments: The antebellum era, Jim Crow, and the modern civil rights movement. This book's focus on the hip-hop South—what Bradley defines as “the experiences of black southerners who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s and use hip-hop culture to buffer themselves from the historical narrative and expectations of civil rights movement era blacks and their predecessors” (6)—offers a necessary corrective, highlighting the complexity of Black southern life in the post-civil rights era and making plain the unrefined nature of popular representations of the South that fail to account for these experiences.

The introduction and first chapter focus on the music and career of OutKast, the celebrated hip-hop artists who Bradley describes as “the founding theoreticians of the hip-hop South” (7). Chapter 1 offers a critical narrative of the group's career, beginning with the now-infamous moment that occurred at the 1995 Source Awards, when the group disrupted the perceived centrality of the East and West Coast hip-hop scenes by claiming that “the South got something to say.” Together with the book's introduction, this chapter thoughtfully examines each of the group's albums in turn, demonstrating how they expanded their music and identity beyond hip-hop's traditional emphasis on regional affiliation—their “southness,” as Bradley terms it—into a more complex theorization of southernness, allowing for “newer articulations of southern blackness outside of the gaze of nonsoutherners who do not possess

¹Notable exceptions include the recent volume edited by Regina Bradley, *An OutKast Reader: Essays on Race, Gender, and the Postmodern South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2021); Justin Adams Burton, *Posthuman Rap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Maco Faniel, *Hip Hop in Houston: The Origin and the Legacy* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2013); Darren Grem, “The South Got Something to Say: Atlanta's Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America,” *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 4 (2006): 55–73; Ali Colleen Neff, *Let the World Listen Right: The Mississippi Delta Hip-Hop Story* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009).

²Roni Sarig, *Third Coast: OutKast, Timbaland, and How Hip-Hop Became a Southern Thing* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2007); Ben Westhoff, *Dirty South: OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-Hop* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2011). See also Briana Younger's body of articles, playlists, and audio segments, 2020 *National Public Radio* series, “The South Got Something to Say: A Celebration of Southern Rap,” <https://www.npr.org/series/897216397/the-south-got-something-to-say-a-celebration-of-southern-rap>.

the sensibilities necessary to see the black South for the complex sociocultural landscape that it is” (37). The next chapter elaborates on the complexities of identity in the hip-hop South by reading Kiese Laymon’s novel *Long Division* alongside OutKast’s second studio album *Aquemini* (1998).³ It concludes with a beautiful reading of the end of Laymon’s book through the lens of OutKast’s “Da Art of Storytelling” paired tracks, noting how these texts acknowledge the messiness of the unfinished work of freedom in the South and how they articulate the ways in which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “mountaintop ain’t flat” (4).

The next two chapters shift their attention away from OutKast to analyzing the articulative capacity of hip-hop in two popular representations of the South: Slavery and the physical space of the trap. Chapter 3 weaves together analyses of Quentin Tarantino’s film *Django Unchained*, Edward P. Jones’ novel *The Known World*, and the WGN series *Underground* to show how the inclusion of hip-hop in each of these texts draws attention to how slavery still influences everyday lived experience in the South.⁴ Chapter 4 begins with a devastatingly honest retelling of the death of Bradley’s father and the role that trap artist Clifford “T.I.” Harris played in processing her grief; this narrative emotionally grounds an alternative reading of the trap as it uncovers how trap music makes young Black men’s grief and grievances legible in T.I.’s music and Jesmyn Ward’s books, *Men We Reaped* and *Where the Line Bleeds*.⁵ The book ends on a celebratory note, however, emphasizing OutKast’s vital influence on the development of southern hip-hop.

At the heart of *Chronicling Stankonia* is an argument about complexity: That contemporary Black identity in the South is not reducible to the lingering shadow of the civil rights movement. Hip-hop, in Bradley’s reading, offers avenues not just for artists to express the nuances of their lived experiences but also for listeners, readers, and fictional characters to make sense of their own lives. Bradley makes this argument by deftly interlacing analyses of a wide variety of texts, including close readings of novels, albums, audiovisual media, and—most uniquely—her own personal autobiography. One section of Chapter 2’s analysis of Laymon’s *Long Division*, for instance, includes Bradley’s reflections on developing her own southern Black girlhood alongside her readings of Robin Boylorn’s autoethnographic narrative *Sweetwater*, Anna Julia Cooper’s 1892 book *A Voice From the South*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Laymon’s character Shalaya Crump, and OutKast’s character Sasha Thumper from “Da Art of Storytelling” (Part 1).⁶ This book is a whirlwind, to be sure, but it is an immensely readable one. Bradley does an exemplary job of describing the texts she engages with, offering enough plot detail that the reader can wallow in the richness of the texts while attending to the analysis of how hip-hop functions in them. Her personal narratives, in particular, compellingly undergird the intellectual contributions of the book. The included epigraph quotation of OutKast member Big Boi—“Bend corners like I was a curve”—not only describes the work of Southern hip-hop artists discussed throughout, but provides an apt description of the intellectual work this book does. Bradley bends methodological corners and demonstrates through her interweaving of many textual elements just how integral hip-hop is to the fabric of contemporary Black southern life.

Chronicling Stankonia offers a necessary and rich glimpse into the complexity of lived experiences in the post-civil rights era South, all through the lens of hip-hop. What is occasionally missing is a focus on the complexity of the musical genre itself. In part, this reflects the strength of Bradley’s characterization of hip-hop as not just a musical soundtrack to life in the hip-hop South, but rather a method of articulating the intricacies of that life. However as the book moves away from the work of OutKast, the distinctions between them and artists like Rick Ross, Pastor Troy, and Kanye West

³Kiese Laymon, *Long Division* (Chicago, IL: Agate, 2013); OutKast, *Aquemini*, LaFace Records, 1998, MP3.

⁴*Django Unchained*, directed by Quentin Tarantino (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 2012); Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); *Underground*, created by Misha Green and Joe Pokaski (NBC: 2016–17).

⁵Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Jesmyn Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* (Chicago, IL: Agate, 2008).

⁶Robin Boylorn, *Sweetwater: Black Women Narratives and Narratives of Resistance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013); Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, Dover Thrift Editions (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2016); Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937, Reprint edition (New York: Amistad, 2006); Laymon, *Long Division*; OutKast, “Da Art of Storytelling” (Part 1), MP3 audio, *Aquemini*, LaFace Records, 1998.


are glossed over under the broad term of hip-hop, partially obscuring the particularities of these artists that lend them the articulative capabilities that Bradley elucidates throughout the book. For example, how might artists' varying degrees of national fame affect how they give voice to a distinctively Southern identity?

Accessible to a wide range of readers, and beloved by the undergraduates I recently assigned it to, Bradley's book provides an excellent model for authors hoping to articulate the nuances of the cultural work that music does, and an elegant example of how gracefully written this sort of work can be. I am eagerly awaiting the next chapter in this narrative as subsequent generations of rappers like Future, Young Thug, Lil Baby, and 21 Savage (to name a few) have made the South—and Atlanta in particular—the most dominant region in hip-hop today. What might this margins-to-mainstream story—the shift from “the South got something to say” to the South dominating the conversation in hip-hop today—tell us about lived experience in the contemporary South, and how might the long-term interest in southern hip-hop alter how the region fits into U.S. culture more broadly? *Chronicling Stankonia* ends with an encouragement to continue writing the cultural history and legacy of this style, and I hope that other scholars take up Bradley on this invitation.

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Industry: Bang on a Can and New Music in the Marketplace

By William Robin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

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Musicological research on contemporary classical music has grown significantly over the past few years. William Robin's recent book adds a detailed account of one of the most influential organizations in the field, Bang on a Can. Founded in 1987 as a festival of contemporary music, it has become one of the most prestigious organizations dedicated to what is called “new music” by its practitioners. The original New York City festival was created by composers Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon, and David Lang and featured about 11 hours of continuous music by avant-garde composers. Through historical research and original interviews, Robin shows how the organization sought to bridge the contentious division between institutionally housed “uptown” musicians such as Milton Babbitt and “downtown” minimalists such as Steve Reich. Here, he draws on Kyle Gann's famous theorization of the New York scene at the time.¹ Robin situates Bang on a Can within a history of influential trends in classical music. He draws on interviews, archival research, analyses of recordings, and press reviews to present a clear and accessible history of the festival, its founders, and the organization they created.

Robin's research demonstrates a pervasive rhetorical advocacy for the embrace of for-profit and public-oriented strategies within new music. Described by Robin as a “market turn,” he argues that this orientation shapes the history of Bang on the Can's founders. All three composers earned graduate degrees at Yale University in the early 1980s. In contrast to other schools where students often imitated their teachers, Yale composition professors Jacob Druckman and Martin Bresnick fostered an atmosphere that encouraged individuality. The result allowed Michael Gordon, who was more interested

¹Kyle Gann, *Music Downtown: Writings from The Village Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).