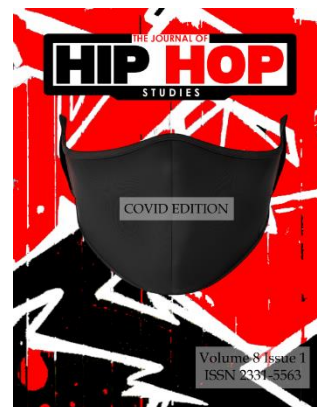


Book Review of Chronicling Stankonia: The Rise of the Hip- Hop South

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Journal of Hip Hop Studies,
Volume 8, Issue 1, Winter 2021, pp. 161 – 164
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34718/bqf1-ea91>



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Book Reviews

Chronicling Stankonia: The Rise of the Hip-Hop South

By Bradley, Regina N. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. Pp. xiv, 136. \$19.95

Right out of the gate, Regina N. Bradley centers *Chronicling Stankonia: The Rise of the Hip-Hop South* as a book inspired by her depth of love for OutKast and what it means to have grown up Black in Georgia in the 1990s. Bradley immediately discloses that her theories about the Black South and the genius of OutKast are personal, intricate, and deeply rooted in her love for community. Bradley is Assistant Professor of English and African Diaspora Studies at Kennesaw State University and is an alumna Nasir Jones Hip Hop Fellow at Harvard University. Her deeply personal and academic storytelling within *Chronicling Stankonia* solidifies her expertise as a leading academic on Black southern experiences as they relate to Hip Hop and popular culture. Similar to academic predecessors such as Imani Perry (*Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*) and Zandria Robinson (*This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South*), Bradley draws on the concepts of Hip Hop cartography. However, the reader will quickly learn that *Chronicling Stankonia* is not just about Atlanta or OutKast.

Bradley begins the journey with a plea to her readers to remember that “The Mountaintop Ain’t Flat” (4) and opens a direct conversation with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech recognizing that the lived experiences of racism in all its forms are still pervasive in the South and globally. Hip Hop provides discourse and relief that helps past and present Black youth circumvent the notions that “Southern blacks are expected to cower in the shadows of racism, succumb to their believed innate backwardness, and live in daily terror simply for being black in the South” (4). She reminds her readers that the “Hip Hop South” provided space for Black people to continuously fight for their right to “speak their truth to power” (5). She then draws attention to OutKast’s special role, suggesting that, while OutKast didn’t invent southern Hip Hop, they are “founding theoreticians of the Hip Hop south”; this is a theory about the South, Hip Hop, and OutKast that no other scholar has ventured. This move gives room for contemporary scholars who want to challenge this notion or contribute to it. Bradley recounts repeatedly that the South “is not a monolith” and that various forms of Hip Hop aesthetics coming out of the South continue to challenge whitewashed, non-southern notions of the South as backward, other, suspended in time, rural, and noncontemporary.

Bradley's book is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, Bradley chronicles OutKast's music and how the artists managed to navigate placing Atlanta on the Hip Hop map. Bradley contends that OutKast winning Best New Rap Group at the 1995 Source Awards served as a reckoning, a moment when southern Hip Hop proved to have pushed past the geographic and cultural boundaries and into mainstream consciousness, much to the chagrin of the New York audience who booed the group during their acceptance speech. Bradley walks us through OutKast's fourth album, *Stankonia*, where OutKast manifests a creative vision, she argues, that reached full maturation as the group continued to "thrive in the taboo and miss fitted pockets of hip-hop and American popular culture" (30). *Stankonia* further vindicates OutKast as legendary Black southern artists who influenced other Black southerners to experiment with expressions of the multiplicities of Black southern life, from joy to pain and back again. OutKast knowingly embraced their position outside of East Coast/West Coast Hip Hop and subsequently existed on the peripheries of mainstream Hip Hop culture until they became creators of it.

In Chapter 2, Bradley walks the reader through her theories of southern Hip Hop aesthetics as forms of storytelling, arguing that "Hip-hop allows post-civil rights writers ... to create literary spaces where the past is in conversation with the present and future" (43). She uses Hip Hop aesthetics as a lens to analyze Kiese Laymon's *Long Division* (a novel about a young Black boy growing up in post-Katrina Mississippi navigating his racial identity through time travel).¹ Laymon's use of OutKast's sophomore album, *Aquemini*, as inspiration for the story serves as key evidence for Bradley's theories of how southern writers connect to the Hip Hop south.² Laymon's use of time travel is cleverly dissected as a metaphor for how southern Black identity and generational anxiety shift while remaining constant.

Bradley gives us another great example in Paul Beatty's 1996 novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, from which she analyzes a passage that heavily exaggerates one of the characters' need for acceptance, bringing into focus the subsequent complacency about a racist hazing ritual.³ Throughout *Chronicling Stankonia*, Bradley examines how southern writers and artists navigate the sociohistorical complexities of being southern while fighting (often through trauma) for equal rights and acceptance in environments not built for them to thrive. Bradley theorizes how contemporary writers use Hip Hop aesthetics while reflecting on the ways in which Black youth often have painful, joyful, and complex relationships with their Blackness, Southernness, and the difficult realities of trying to live authentically. Ultimately Bradley suggests that, unlike many Black southern literary predecessors, writers influenced by Hip Hop aesthetics (knowingly or

¹ Kiese Laymon, *Long Division* (Chicago: Agate Bolden, 2013).

² OutKast, *Aquemini* (Atlanta: LaFace Records, 1998).

³ Paul Beatty, *White Boy Shuffle* (1996; New York: Picador, 2021).

unknowingly) are choosing to bring identity politics and Black trauma to the forefront of stories of the South while embracing the uncertainty of Black futures. OutKast and writers like Laymon and Beatty bring forth conflicting experiences of southern Blackness while “disrupting the narrative of southern black stoicism ... [and believing that] the multiplicities of southern blackness exist simultaneously in the past, present, and future” (59).

Bradley also takes the reader into a foray of contemporary pop culture examples that utilize Hip Hop aesthetics to create fictional versions of the US South that serve as case studies for “slavery’s position in a hip-hop South by illustrating how black oppression, black complicity, and black protest remain inextricably linked” (17). Bradley explores how sonic and cultural Hip Hop aesthetics ground modern slave narratives. She dissects the opening scene of WGN television series *Underground* which depicts a fugitive from slavery being hunted by patrollers with dogs ready to viciously attack. Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead” percussion grounds the opening scene, using Hip Hop as “an entry point for witnessing the horrors and complexities of enslaved black people trying to maneuver the white supremacist power structures historically documented in the American imagination while plotting their own sense of freedom and agency” (62). Bradley posits that understanding the presence of Hip Hop aesthetics in popular culture provides a contemporary way of engaging with the representations of slavery that endure and exist in direct conversation with contemporary life. Bradley also uses Chapter 3 to discuss typical imaginings of the South by popular writers such as Karen L. Cox, author of *Dreaming of Dixie* and *Gone With the Wind*. These novels highlight the selective memory of the elaborate South in popular culture. White columns, large porches, pecan trees, and visual beauty are all examples of selective memories that ignore the realities of how these luxuries came to exist (65). In less palatable representations that cast light on the true horrors of slavery, “the unimaginable is often sonic” (65). Examples include “The screams of enslaved women and men as they were raped; the size and huffs caused by overworked black hands ... Sounds of big dogs and slave patrollers’ excited laughter as they incite their dogs to tear into fugitive slaves’ bodies” (65). Creators use Hip Hop aesthetics (sonic, rhythmic) as sonic ways of engaging the consumer with the horrors of the past in representations where creative visual might be too grotesque to consume (65).

In chapter 4, Bradley explores the sociological concept of “the trap” (underground drug culture) and how “the trap” is understudied as a space for grief, particularly the grief of black men that often remains invisible and unheard. Bradley’s interrogation of “the trap” in Clifford “T.I.” Harris’ music serves as one of her case studies for her theorization of what “the trap” represents in fluid, Black collective consciousness. Bradley begins by giving us an emotionally compelling description of how T.I.’s *Urban Legend* album helped her grieve the sudden loss of her father. Specific

tracks like “Motivation” helped her sonically self-medicate and work through the anger and confusion she experienced while mourning. She contends that T.I. branded “trap rap” (rap music with a heavy focus on illegal drug culture) in the commercial ways that mainstream audiences recognize the genre today. While many trap rap artists such as Yo Gotti, Gucci Mane, and Jeezy perform stoic trap that celebrates how “hustling” and drug culture can provide a come-up, artists like T.I. offer multiple meanings in their “trap” (86). T.I. uses “the trap” in his music to articulate how he navigates the complexities of witnessing, participating in, and grieving violence. She contends that T.I.’s trap music presents a space for reckoning and vulnerability while humanizing drug dealers who are so often misunderstood and written off by society. Trap music strategically navigates maintaining authenticity in conjunction with commercial gain. One of the ways in which Bradley authenticates her theorization of “the trap” as a space for grieving is by taking a deep dive into T.I.’s album *T.I. vs. T.I.P.* She breaks down how T.I.’s schizophrenic persona in the album denotes the silent code of Black male grieving; the suffering that many Black men face while enduring internal conflicts of maintaining authenticity, overextending their representation of Blackness, and navigating capitalism and marginalization while simply existing in the South. For Bradley, trap music provides a space where southern Black communities and individuals can openly and angrily grieve those who “may not be seen as respectable or worthy of remembrance,” at times including themselves (98).

Bradley’s *Chronicling Stankonia* is a must-read for anyone wanting to understand the past, present, and future of American Hip Hop. Bradley’s work makes great strides to circumvent the lack of academic scrutiny and ignorance surrounding Hip Hop as it relates to the South and the multidimensional experiences that it entails. *Chronicling Stankonia* also serves as a call-to-action for scholars to step forward and center the South in academic discourse surrounding Hip Hop. Bradley closes the book by ensuring her readers are acknowledging that southern Hip Hop aesthetics dominate Hip Hop and mainstream culture today. New explorations of southern Hip Hop include “the possibility of a digital South” since “regional affiliation [is] no longer the hurdle it was in the early 1990’s” when OutKast rose to stardom (100). As Bradley puts it, “the South still got something to say” (101). *Chronicling Stankonia* serves as a rallying call to bring the non-monolithic South and the criticism that engages it to the forefront of Hip Hop and academic scholarship.

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