

The Love Below (the Mason Dixon Line): OutKast's Rejection at the 1995 Source Awards

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Blog post published April 3, 2017 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/xwjtj-6dd31>

Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Diasporic Sound, Hip Hop



Recommended citation

Bradley, R. N. (2017, April 3). The Love Below (the Mason Dixon Line): OutKast's Rejection at the 1995 Source Awards. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/xwjtj-6dd31>

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During his acceptance speech at 2017's Golden Globe awards, actor and rapper Donald "Childish Gambino" Glover thanked the black people of the city of Atlanta for "being alive," and the Atlanta trap rap group Migos for their single "Bad and Boujee." As the camera panned out into the crowd, it showed dominantly white faces full of confusion and polite yet uncomfortable laughter. These audience members seemed unfamiliar with Migos and with categorizing a "black" Atlanta (and South) separate from the pop culture hub we know as Atlanta today. Glover's speech re-affirmed the sentiments of Outkast's Andre "3000" Benjamin over twenty years' prior at the 1995 Source Awards, that the (black) South got something to say.



<https://youtu.be/QxJ3nVjRZHE>

As I've argued previously, Andre and Big Boi's acceptance speech at the Source Awards was the springboard for what I call the "hip hop south," the social-cultural experiences that frame southern blackness after the Civil Rights Movement. The declaration "the South got something to say"—and the booing that ensued—is important to engaging how southerners see and hear themselves in a contemporary landscape. The Source Award's dominantly New York audience booing both jolts the ear and affirms hip hop's hyper-regional focus in the early to mid 1990s. The booing crowd identifies hip hop as northeastern, urban, and rigidly masculine, an aesthetic that was a daunting task for non-northeastern performers to try and break through. Even celebrated west coast artists like Snoop Dogg, who menacingly and repeatedly asked the crowd "you don't love us?" during the show, struggled with the challenge of being recognized – and respected – by northeast hip hop enthusiasts.



OutKast at the 1995 Source Awards

The 1995 Source Awards proved to be the climax of the beef instigated by both West Coast Death Row Records and East Coast Bad Boy Records, the bitter lyrical and personal battle between Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G., and OutKast, a Southern act, chosen as “Best New Rap Group.” The crowd’s increasingly despondent sonic rejection of hip hop outside of New York foregrounds my reading of OutKast’s acceptance speech as blatant and unforgiving southern black protest, a rallying cry that carves a space for the hip hop south to come into existence.

A recap of that night, in which Christopher “Kid” Reid and Salt-N-Pepa presented OutKast their award. Upbeat and playful, Kid says “ladies help me out” to announce the winner, but there is a distinctive drop in their enthusiasm when naming OutKast the winner of the category. The inflection in their voices signifies shock and even disappointment, with Kid quickly trying to be diplomatic by shouting out OutKast’s frequent collaborators and label mates Goodie Mob. The negative reaction from the crowd was immediate, with sharp and continuous booing.



<https://youtu.be/vwLG7aSYM3w>

Big Boi starts his acceptance speech, dropping a few colloquial words immediately recognizable as *proper* hip hop – “word” and “what’s up?” Over a growingly irritated crowd, Big Boi acknowledges that he is in New York, “y’all’s city,” and tries to show respect to the New York rappers by crediting them as “original emcees.” Big Boi recognizes he is an outsider, his southern drawl long and clear in his pronunciation of “south” as “souf,” yet attempts to be diplomatic and respectful of New York. There is also a recognition that where he is from, Atlanta, is also a city: his statement, “y’all’s city,” is not only a recognition of his being an outsider but a proclamation that he, too, comes from a city—except it’s a different city.

Big Boi’s embrace of Atlanta as urban challenges previous cultural narratives of southerners as incapable of maneuvering within an urban setting. Because of a long-standing and comfortable assumption that the American south was incapable of anything urban (i.e. mass transit, tall buildings, bustling neighborhoods and other forms of communities), beliefs about southerners’ perspectives remained aligned with rural – read ‘country’ and ‘backward’ – sensibilities incapable of functioning within an urban cultural setting. These sensibilities often played out in longhand form via literature or in popular black music, with focus on dialect and language standing in as a signifier of regional and cultural distinction.



Big Boi still repping ATL in 2012, Outside Lands Music Festival, San Francisco, CA, Image by Flickr User Thomas Hawk, (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Consider Rudolph Fisher's southern protagonist King Solomon Gillis from the short story "[City of Refuge](#)" (1925). Fisher's characterization of Gillis, a black man from rural North Carolina, is one of naiveté and awe for not only New York and its sounds, but the premise of city life in general. In the opening of the story Fisher describes Gillis's ride on the subway as "terrifying," with "strange and terrible sounds." References to the bang and clank of the subway doors and the close proximity of each train as "distant thunder" is particularly striking, a subtle sonic nod to Gillis' rural southernness and his inability to articulate the subway system outside of his limited southern experiences. The references to "heat," "oppression," and "suffocation" also lend premise to southern weather, as well as the belief of the American south as an unending repetition of slavery and its effects.

It is important to point out that Gillis certainly isn't a fearful man in the literal sense: his reason for migrating to Harlem was out of necessity and desperation after shooting a white man back home to avoid being lynched. Yet Fisher's attention to sound presents Gillis as an outsider. Further, Fisher describes Gillis as "Jonah emerging from the whale," both a biblical allusion to triumph over a difficult situation as well as a rebirth, the possibility of a new life and new purpose. This can be connected to the biblical reckoning of southern black folks migrating out of the south for social-economic change and advancement.

Still, southern black folks emerging in the city is not an easy transition, with Gillis' train ride and his discomfort with the sounds it produces symbolizing the move from one difficult landscape to another. Although Gillis ultimately is confronted with the brutality he was trying to avoid in North Carolina, his repetitive proclamation, "they even got cullud policemen!" amplified his southernness and naiveté. Fisher's intentional use of written dialect enhances the repetitiveness

of the impact of seeing black police officers, which blots out the characteristic of region but not white supremacy as a whole. Gillis's acceptance of black police officers blurred the binaries of the Great Migration as a testament to black folks not only looking for social-economic change outside of the American South, a terroristic space for blacks, but the unfortunate anxiety of those deciding to remain in the south, complacent in the lack of social equality.



Panel 35 of Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series, documenting Black Americans' move to Northern Urban Centers : "They Left the South in Great Numbers. They Arrived in the North in Great Numbers." Photo by Flickr User Ron Cogswell, (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Seventy years later Big Boi, a Georgian, returns to New York with the confidence of both rural and southern sensibilities outside of the immediately recognizable urban trope embodied by New York. Big Boi's full embrace of being "cullud," in both the linguistic and cultural elements that Fisher's long-hand dialect represented as authentic southernness, is jarring because his intentional embrace of southern blackness as othered anchors his approach to rap music. Big Boi does not posture the south as a space or place in need of escape or reposturing. Rather, the hyper-awareness from both Big Boi and Andre in front of the dominantly New York crowd ruptures the accepted narrative of the south as needing saving by non-southern counterparts. Big Boi's speech forces the audience to de-romanticize their notions of northeastern supremacy and recognize the south as capable of hip hop. Their direct booing is a sonic representation of that discomfort.

From this perspective, André's now iconic remarks from the acceptance speech further emphasized Big Boi's departure from reckoning with northeastern hip hop as the standard. He stumbles in his speech, possibly because of nerves or irritation, and, like Big Boi, must talk over

the crowd. André speaks about having the “demo tape and don’t nobody wanna hear it,” a double signifier of not only being rejected for his southernness but also the difficulty of breaking into the music industry. André’s frustration with being unheard as a southerner can also be extended into the actual production of the tape by OutKast’s production team Organized Noize, who drew from southern musical influences like funk, blues, and gospel to ground their beats. Andre’s call-to-arms, “the south got something to say,” rallied other southern rappers to self-validate their own music. It is important to note that André’s rally called to the entire south, not just Atlanta. This is significant in thinking about southern experiences as non-monolithic, the aural-cultural possibilities of multiple Souths and their various intersections using hip hop aesthetics.



OutKast at the Pemberton Music Festival, CREDIT MARK C AUSTIN(CC BY 2.0)

OutKast moves past their rejection at the Source Awards via their second album *ATLiens* (Atlanta aliens), which offered an equal rejection of hip hop culture’s binaries. The album’s use of ‘otherworldly’ sonic signifiers i.e. synthesizers and pockets of silence that sounded like space travel – embodied their deliberate isolation from mainstream hip hop culture. Still, OutKast didn’t forget their rejection, sampling their acceptance speech in the final track from their third album *Aquemini* titled “Chonkyfire.” The brazen and hazy riffs of an electric guitar guide the song, with the recording from the source appearing at the end of the track. There is a deliberate slowing down of the track, with both the accompaniment and the recording becoming increasingly muddled. After André’s declaration “the south got something to say,” the track begins to crawl to its end, a sonic signifier of not only the end of the album but also the end of OutKast’s concern with bi-coastal hip hop expectations. Sampling their denial at the Source Awards was a full-circle moment for their music and identities. It was a reminder that the South was a legitimate hip hop cultural space.

https://youtu.be/MaYa1bSCg_A

In this contemporary moment, there is less focus and interest in establishing regional identities in hip hop. The dominance of social media collapses a specific need to carve up hip hop spaces per physical parameters. Sonically, there is an intriguing phenomenon occurring where rappers from across the country are borrowing from southern hip hop aesthetics, whether it be the drawl, bass kicks, or lyrical performance. Although our focus on social media has seemingly collapsed the physical need to differentiate region and identity, geographical aesthetics remain central to our listening practices. With this in mind, OutKast's initial rejection from then mainstream hip hop in favor of sonic and cultural reckonings of southern blackness keep them central to conversations about how the Hip Hop South continues to ebb and weave within and outside the parameters of hip hop culture. Their rejection of hip hop's stage solidified their place on it.

Featured Image "Big Boi I" by Flickr user Matt Perich ([CC BY 2.0](#))

Regina N. Bradley, Ph.D is an instructor of English and Interdisciplinary Studies at Kennesaw State University. She earned her Ph.D in African American Literature at Florida State University in 2013. Regina writes about post-Civil Rights African American literature, the contemporary U.S. South, pop culture, race and sound, and Hip Hop. Her current book project explores how critical hip hop (culture) sensibilities can be used to navigate race and identity politics in this supposedly postracial moment of American history. Also known as Red Clay Scholar, a nod to her Georgia upbringing, Regina [maintains a blog and personal website](#) and can also be reached on Twitter at [@redclayscholar](#).



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