

BECOMING OUTKASTED

Archiving Contemporary Black Southernness in a Digital Age

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I didn't expect "OutKasted Conversations" to catch so many people's attention. It started out as a pet project, a way to celebrate the Atlanta, Georgia, duo OutKast's twentieth anniversary in hip-hop. OutKast, an acronym for Operating under the Krooked American System Too Long, heavily influenced my coming of age in southwest Georgia in the 1990s. Their music offered a blueprint for thinking about black southern folks' lives (and why they mattered) after the civil rights movement. OutKast introduced the world to the funkiness of what hip-hop could do in the South, opening doors for the complexity of southern black life—pain, pleasure, remembrance, and perseverance. OutKast's body of work gave young southern black folks the green light to embrace their experiences and carve out a space to recognize their own agency rather than dismiss it as a side effect of the civil rights movement. "OutKasted Conversations" moved that conversation and recognition past music into the digital realm, creating a digital site for teasing out how hip-hop can serve as a catalyst of change in the post-civil rights American South.¹

The Project Premise

“OutKasted Conversations” started as a lively conversation with friends over lunch about hip-hop albums celebrating their twentieth anniversaries in 2014. Names of now-iconic albums were thrown across the table over our lunches: Notorious B.I.G.’s *Ready to Die*, Da Brat’s *Funkdafied*, Warren G’s *Regulate . . . G Funk Era*, Scarface’s *The Diary*, and Nas’s *Illmatic*. My colleagues/friends—Bettina Love, Emery Petchauer, and Christopher Emdin—were most vocal about their excitement around the festivities regarding *Illmatic*’s anniversary. The album’s anniversary would be well acknowledged, including a documentary *Time Is Illmatic* and a live orchestra performance of the album at the Kennedy Center for the Arts in Washington, D.C. For my colleagues, mostly reared in the Northeast, *Illmatic* represented the angst of growing up black at the end of the twentieth century. *Illmatic* provided artistic context for the socioeconomic disparities and strife affecting black urban America in the 1980s and early 1990s in the aftermath of the Reagan administration. Granted, *Illmatic*’s sophistication lies in its cross-section of jazz aesthetics and gritty, street storytelling, sonically and culturally pulling from the trope of New York as a hard and bustling city. For example, the consistent use of jazz piano, turntable scratches, and the sound of rustling subway trains along their tracks make *Illmatic* a masterful demonstration of hip-hop’s function as a site of urbanity and contemporary black culture.

However, I didn’t share the same level of excitement as my friends because my love of hip-hop didn’t come of age in the Northeast. When Nas asked “Whose World Is This?” or declared a “New York State of Mind” (two tracks from *Illmatic*), I was not his intended audience. I was a country girl from Albany, Georgia. Tractors commanded the roads dusted over by dirt coming from fields of cotton, corn, and melons. Red clay was never idle if white shoes were nearby. Noisy cicadas and crickets fussed at each other early in the morning and late at night. OutKast was prominent on my playlist, helping me work through and recognize what it meant to be young, southern, and black. Many young black southerners used OutKast to find a voice amongst the murmurs of the past and present that flowed in and out of our everyday lives. Southern hip-hop provided a space for recognizing the complexity of a more current moment of black southern identity: coming to terms with the strides and shortcomings of the civil rights movement while taking joy in being young, southern, and black. OutKast demonstrated young southern blacks could dance and critique, laugh and mourn, and carve out space for unorthodox perspectives. OutKast’s body of work offered a type of

sensibility that catered to my southernness. They offered a rich sonic tapestry of historical southern black sensibilities—ring shouts, blues, gospel choirs and the black church, for example—while using hip-hop to establish their knowledge of self and while complicating the context of the South in hip-hop culture. Although urban southernness is more embraced in hip-hop today, OutKast introduced the possibility of the South as a contemporary and urban space. They cataloged Atlanta using a hip-hop hybrid of lyricism, spoken word, gospel, and funk music. OutKast signifies on rural and urban southern tropes to acknowledge the possibility of young southern blacks being able to carve out space within hip-hop while sustaining a narrative parallel to (not submissive to) the civil rights movement. I was excited for OutKast’s reunion tour in honor of the twentieth anniversary of *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik*. I was never old enough to go to a live performance when they were actively touring. Seeing a reunion performance (or three) was at the top of my list.

My initial premise for “OutKasted Conversations” was to create a space to celebrate OutKast’s overall dopeness. I wanted to recognize their music and artistry as innovative and critical to hip-hop’s development as a culture. As a scholar and member of the post-civil rights black South, I set out to celebrate OutKast’s accomplishments and center them in more critical conversations taking place in (new) southern studies and hip-hop studies. In addition to providing a critical backdrop for thinking through OutKast’s reunion tour, I also wished to push discussions into the multiple facets that OutKast covers in their work, including race, gender, education, economics, spirituality vs. organized religion, sexuality, and identity in the post-civil rights South. And, like OutKast, I wanted to extend the conversations we had about their work outside of cafeteria tables and back into mainstream discussions of hip-hop.

YouTube provided a platform to update the cafeteria-table talk trope: its easy access invited viewers to “pull up a chair” to the conversation, (re)introduce themselves to OutKast’s music, and discuss how they can be positioned in hip-hop and in the academy. Hosting the series on YouTube simultaneously archived the discussion and pushed back against the way one listens to and critically engages with hip-hop in digital spaces. It served as a curatorial space, a means for me to select and engage the types of stories and critical approaches necessary to reinvigorate conversations about OutKast’s contributions to hip-hop. OutKast is the first southern hip-hop group to gauge contemporary scripts of blackness while referring to the past to annotate their southernness. “OutKasted Conversations” served as a digital

complement to OutKast's undertaking of the continuous task to recognize southern black folks' cultural and sociopolitical agency in a more contemporary form. Perhaps most importantly, "OutKasted Conversations" experimented in digitizing the experiences of the contemporary black South, an effort to create a "playlist" of interviews that conceptualize and add depth to considerations about how hip-hop and regional identity merged to create new digital identities in the post-civil rights American South.

Aesthetic Influences

"OutKasted Conversations" is a critical dialogue series recorded on Google Hangout and hosted on my YouTube channel. The series concludes with a playlist boasting forty episodes and interviews with fans, scholars, and artists who enjoy and are familiar with OutKast's work. The interview and conversational format borrows from Mark Anthony Neal's "Left of Black" series of webcasts. Neal's use of social media as a platform for public scholarship and education is a useful model for connecting critical frameworks to nonacademic audiences. "Left of Black" features an interdisciplinary focus that provided context for crafting "OutKasted Conversations" as a site for multiple entry points of analysis about the contemporary South using OutKast's work. "OutKasted Conversations" uses new media as an intervention for new southern black studies using hip-hop. I used this project to extend conversations about the post-civil rights South offered by scholars like Imani Perry, Zandria Robinson, and Riche Richardson.² Perry, Richardson, and Robinson include OutKast in their analysis of southern identity politics and spaces, but they do not centralize the duo's work in their respective studies. "OutKasted Conversations" is the first project of its kind to centralize OutKast as a cultural framework for analyzing race and identity in the post-civil rights South.

Further, this project's social-media format evokes Zora Neale Hurston's approach to ethnographic study. Hurston's training as an anthropologist allowed her to document and record southern black folklife in the 1930s for the Works Progress Administration. Her influence is significant to this project because she was a black woman archiving southern black life while participating in the culture she observed. Myron Beasley's discussion of Hurston's place as a subject of digital scholarship (chapter 2 in this volume) adds further context to considerations of how black culture resonates within digital spaces. Beasley acknowledges Hurston's sonic ethnographic studies

as immersive and necessarily self-subjective scholarship. Hurston's use of sound and recording tools created an alternative space for articulating southern blackness. It offered Hurston the opportunity not only to record the stories of marginalized southern black folks but also to record herself and her perspective into cultural history and memory. Beasley writes that Hurston's sonic work "eliminate[s] boundaries between the scholar and the participants and mak[es] known the cultural politics of doing fieldwork and producing creative and accessible ways of (re)presenting scholarship and creating new texts."

Additionally, Beasley's marking of digital media as comprising a "contested space" doubly binds the scholarly development of technology to region and gender. Hurston's sonic ethnography laid the groundwork for my own because it intentionally existed between the grooves of its audio recordings, purposely inhabiting the interstitial spaces between what is considered traditional and public scholarship. Hurston's body of work recognizes that the (rural) black South did not fit onto a typecast page or within the framework of traditional critical anthropology. Thus, she used sound and sound production in all their manifestations—whether she was literally spelling out dialect in her creative writing or recording the sound of her own voice as it connected to the larger conversation taking place via southern folklore and song. Her body of work ruptures cemented expectations of race and scholarship in the academy and among the public. She demonstrated the highest levels of public scholarship by situating herself within the public. Hurston is a part of the culture she studied, which left room for her subjects to tell their own stories in their own ways.

As a southern black woman scholar working with digital media, I find Hurston's model of sonic ethnographic study useful for creating space to think through and record the experiences of those viewpoints otherwise overlooked in cultural studies. Each episode serves as a mini-rupture or intervention that leads to viewing OutKast (and ultimately southern black popular culture) as a framework for contemporary black identity. Like Hurston, I actively participated in each interview, sharing my own stories, humor, and excitement about the lasting relevance of OutKast's work on my self-identification as a young southern black woman. My engagement with each interviewee states my vested interest in their stories and ideas. My being "present" as a subject as well as the moderator of each conversation—just as Hurston was in her ethnographic studies—allows "OutKasted Conversations" to blur the lines between curating articulations of southern blackness and participating in the articulation of southern blackness. This is import-

ant because black cultural expression, especially southern black culture, ebbs and weaves between active participation in culture and its creation.

Interviewee Selection and Discussion Question Samples

To discuss the significance of OutKast's contribution to popular culture, I intentionally selected the majority of project interviewees for their southern backgrounds or intimate knowledge of the South. Their southern sensibilities came from multiple vantage points—I interviewed guests who grew up in Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, Florida, Tennessee, and Texas—which lends credence to the project's main objective: identifying and clarifying how OutKast signifies a complex and nonmonolithic southern black experience. Interviewees were also selected for their fresh insights, innovative scholarship, and willingness to help promote the series. Upon their agreement to participate, I sent each interviewee a list of questions to help steer the direction of each interview. Questions were geared toward the interviewees' area(s) of expertise. The resulting conversation led to a unique and exciting use OutKast's work to understand race and identity in the contemporary American South.

Crafting “OutKasted Conversations”

Each interview began with the question “How did you become OutKasted?” This question is pivotal to the entire interview. It is a unifying thread of commonality for the project and breaks ground for archiving one's personal experiences with OutKast. The question also speaks to the significance that the act of listening plays in articulating a cultural framework of one's lived experiences. As interviewees shared their stories they also revealed how they listened to OutKast, when they listened to OutKast, and why they listened to OutKast. Their responses laid the groundwork for more traditional methods of analysis to take place in the interview. The act of listening served as a primary method of engaging OutKast's music as a critical framework for race, class, and identity politics in the post-civil rights South. “OutKasted Conversations” collected stories about the varied listening practices surrounding OutKast's music. I used them to create a cultural reference point for contemporary southern black culture. The act of collective listening overlapped with the act of “collective watching” via YouTube. Both the series and

the digital platform are grounded in personal tastes in streaming, forms of consciousness, listening preferences, and sociocultural attachments. The interviews extend the way collective cultural memory on a single subject can merge and “stream” in digital spaces. For example, in an interview with DJ Jelly, the first DJ in Atlanta to play OutKast’s breakout track “Elevators” from the *ATLiens* album, Jelly discussed his initial listen of the song on vinyl. Jelly’s discussion of breaking the record on air using a vinyl LP demonstrated the collective act of listening: radio listeners calling to request the song after hearing it, OutKast’s transition from a local Atlanta hip-hop group to the national hip-hop stage, and the physical act of listening—which encompassed the transition from vinyl albums to compact discs and highlighted the role of the DJ as a curator of sonic cultural memory and experience. Asking interviewees about their initial experiences listening to OutKast positions listening as an act to collapse binaries of public/private cultural markers and gendered expressions of southern identity.

Further, consider episode four, which features Dr. Treva Lindsey, an assistant professor in the Department of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Ohio State University. She is also a member of the Pleasure Ninjas Collective, a group of black feminist scholars who interrogate pleasure as a form of resistance and reclamation of power in black women’s lives. Lindsey’s episode focuses on the connections between the sonic and pleasure in OutKast’s work. Lindsey’s theorization of “user-friendly” patriarchy highlights the nonabrasive yet misogynistic undertones of women’s narratives heard in OutKast’s music while also pointing out how their sonic cues of womanhood—moaning and laughter, for example—demonstrate the rich complexity in utilizing OutKast’s music as a critical framework for understanding gender and sexuality in hip-hop. Lindsey’s interview offers sound as an alternative framework for analyzing contemporary issues of race and sexuality. The digital format of the interview was useful here because Lindsey could sonically demonstrate the oral indicators of black women’s sexual politics used in OutKast’s music. The video interview allowed for a sonic and academic performance of the Lindsey’s analysis, offering an immediate and engaging critical insight into OutKast’s work.

Each episode serves as a multilayered standing reservoir of contemporary scholarship. The topics addressed throughout the series—from gender and pleasure politics to automobile culture to film studies—work well in a digital platform because of its immediate access. Unlike a traditional print journal article, where the publication process can span anywhere between a year and five years, digital scholarship is immediate and can be immedi-

ately applied to cultural studies and discussions taking place in the present. Additionally, the immediacy of digital scholarship feeds into the fickleness of public interest. The “OutKasted Conversations” series took advantage of a sociohistorical moment when interest in OutKast—who have not released new music as a group in the last decade—reignited to celebrate their international twentieth-anniversary reunion tour in 2014. The public’s interest in OutKast (including those who came of age on their music and those who only knew them because their Coachella performance raised curiosity about who they were) helped buoy the progression of the series throughout its production.

Further, the dialogue series signifies the blurring of the academy as a private and publically unresponsive space. As I state previously, the intimacy and lightheartedness of the conversations emphasize the crossover appeal of a cultural subject like OutKast in both academic and lay spaces. Viewers have access not only to the academic discourse but also to the voices behind the analysis. The interview documents not only the analysis but also its delivery. The critical engagement is not lost but reimagined to speak to a wider audience than exists inside the classroom or between the pages of an academic journal.

Process Editing

After the conversation was recorded, the raw footage was downloaded and edited with video software (iMovie). I minimized editing to preserve the organic flow of the conversation and to keep intact the critical work being done. Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of the project for me was undergoing a public version of peer review for my work. Rather than relying on academic experts in the field to offer insight, I relied heavily on my viewership to help me improve the format and functionality of the project. Feedback was quick, personable, and utilized with a quick turnaround in the project’s production. For example, the earlier interviews of “OutKasted Conversations” (episodes 1–10) are minimally edited video from a conversation recorded on Google Hangout with an attached title slide. Episodes were long, ranging from thirty-five to sixty minutes.

After receiving feedback from viewers and consulting new media strategists like Mark Anthony Neal, Marisa Parham, and my partner, Roy Bradley, I sought to make the episodes more polished and to retain audiences by cutting down the length of each episode. I switched the format to include a title

slide, an introduction slide listing the guest's name, and end credits. Each episode only lasted from fifteen to twenty minutes. Starting with episode 11, a friend and music producer, J. French, gave me an instrumental track to use as the series' theme song. The song played approximately five to seven seconds and faded out after the slide introducing the episode number and name of the guest. To further polish the final product, I added a photograph of the featured guest to the introduction slide. I then exported the segments from iMovie and uploaded the final product on YouTube. Uploading episodes on YouTube made me stick to a weekly production schedule—filming the episode and editing it a week in advance of its airing—to keep drumming up viewer interest and maintain a consistent presence on social media.

Publication and Advertising

The polished segments were uploaded weekly to YouTube and shared via Twitter and Facebook. I would tweet the link to the project using the hashtag #OutKastedConversations to track its movement across social media. I also tagged OutKast member Big Boi to alert him to the series and new episodes. By advertising via social media, I hoped to achieve additional conversations about the episode and OutKast with a broader scope and audience. Indeed, I achieved a broad audience. “OutKasted Conversations” realized nearly eight thousand unique hits, and over two hundred users subscribed to my YouTube channel. It was featured in major digital media publications like *For Harriet*, *Sounding Out!*, *Creative Loafing Atlanta*, *Huffington Post Live*, the *New York Times* popular culture blog, and the *Feminist Wire*. The project garnered fanfare on social media in the form of retweets, direct mentions, and Facebook (re)posts. Although there was significant support from public platforms, there were few fan emails or correspondence outside of the publications previously mentioned.

Lasting Impact

“OutKasted Conversations” stands as a public archive of southern hip-hop collective memory. I am currently in conversations to move it to a more stable digital platform. The focus on OutKast serves as intervention to include more southern voices—both literal and conceptual—in the canon of southern studies and hip-hop scholarship. Social media provided me a platform

to engage a subject matter and explore perspectives otherwise overlooked in the academy. “OutKasted Conversations” exists at the crux of sound studies and new southern black studies because it interrogates how critical voices and expertise legitimize themselves outside of academic discourse. Like the black southern oral traditions studied and documented by Zora Neale Hurston, “OutKasted Conversations” became a space of collective reckoning about how the South is rendered from a post–civil rights southern black perspective. OutKast served as a subject and as a springboard for renegotiating contemporary black agency for those generations removed from the historical civil rights era. These types of conversations take place in cars, around lunchroom tables, or through phone calls and texts. Public discussion can overlap with academic study to create new discourses and add deeper contexts. “OutKasted Conversations” reflects the overlap of popular and academic study by using alternative methods of analysis like sound and social media. It is a testament to the multiple possibilities of using hip-hop culture in digital spaces to update the South to reflect its present and future states.

NOTES

- 1 For links to all forty-two conversations, please visit my website at www.redclayscholar.com.
- 2 See Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*; Robinson, *This Ain't Chicago*; and Richardson, *Black Masculinity*. These studies contextualize OutKast and their scripts of blackness and masculinity within the framework of a contemporary and urban/postindustrial South.

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