

## [Review] Forrest Stuart (2020) Ballad of the bullet: gangs, drill music, and the power of online infamy

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From a liberal to critical theory of drill: reading Forrest Stuart's *Ballad of the Bullet against the grain*.

*Ballad of the Bullet* is a sociological ethnography of drill musicians in Chicago in a neighbourhood dubbed *Chiraq*. Based on two years participant observation, the book follows a collective of drillers, the Corner Boys, from the street to the studio, accompanying their movements inside and outside the city, as they build their profiles and personas. Forrest Stuart's central focus is how these young musicians seek to get rich or get by through performing violence in their online music videos and social media biographies. Stuart shows how these performances shape the musician's lives, city rivalries, friendships and wider social relationships.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One sets the historical context for the book, showing how the online economy of drillers' overlays that of the local drugs trade. Chapter Two explores how drillers disseminate their digital products. Chapter Three, addresses how drillers establish authenticity and credibility through their use of social media. Chapter Four investigates the building of online identities and influence. Chapter Five shows how the performance of online violence relates back to their street corner in Taylor Park. Chapter Six links those performances to the consumption practices of white middle class fans. Chapter Seven address how local Chicago teens build their status through the driller's social media profiles and biographies.

As Stuart states in the conclusion, the overriding intention of the book is to reduce the moral gulf between mainstream American society and a vilified group of young people, by showing the humanity of the later. While the book succeeds in a version of humanisation, the terms by which it succeeds are not neutral, but liberal. This skilfully told account of drill culture in Chicago falls into the genre of liberal ethnography. That is to say, its political and moral drivers revolve around the crisis of the individual and their redemption and re-assimilation into an imagined good life, curated and told by the ethnographer. As Stuart notes in the Preface, 'Behind their online bravado is a desperate attempt to build a better future for themselves, to feel loved, to be seen as someone special' (p.xi).

The book offers a wealth of insight on capitalism, social media and the sociality of music but to fully benefit from these, one must then read against the grain. Read against the grain, the defining contribution of the book becomes not a meta-account of thwarted uplift but a profound investigation of subjectivity and mediation in the context of hyper-capitalism. It explores the subjectification of drill musicians marginalised by capitalism as they actively and expertly co-produce an alienating vortex in which their gender, sexuality, economy, friendships, personal biographies, habitual rhythms, and even the geography of the city beat to the restless violence of social media's entrepreneur/desire nexus.

Here, the book furnishes a number of key observations. The infrequently noted connection between celebrity and cultural authenticity opens up a much-needed analysis of how reification functions across contemporary capitalist terrains often presumed to be disconnected. That is linked to the fetishization of drill music's authentic objects (biographies, clothing, street scenes, violent acts) and the simultaneous activity of those in local and global commodity flows which, as the operating logic of social media capitalism

demands, are out of time and place. What is made and consumed in drill social media posts is then a pastiche of incongruent codes (see the reading, splicing and imitation of gang handshakes in Chapter Six) that feed various capitalist drives and desires (p.57).

The book's movement on these grounds, chapter by chapter, between different actors and territories (both physical and online) allows for a cyclical return, generating a complex dialectical account of drill culture. To be clear, what is being read here is much more than the routine observation on the intertwining of (social) media *with* subjectivity. Rather, *Ballad of the Bullet* shows how social media capitalism has become an overwhelming and determining facet *of* subjectivity. Socially mediated violence is then not accounted for by the 'thin skins' of today's youth but by the thickness of social mediation in their lives (p.83).

The act of reading against the grain opens up further enquires, on which the book is largely silent. In reaching this point, I am not asking for the book to be written differently but following the consequences of reading it differently. The first silence that emerges through this exercise, and perhaps the loudest, is the absence of race and imperialism in the analysis. The neighbourhood in which the book is set is noted to be a black neighbourhood, drill is a black music form, but aside from passing reference, there is no sustained attention to race in the book. We are struck by the knowledge of racial inequality in US cities, but the relationship between the structural and historical violence of American society and young black men, the relation of that to what Cornell West calls the 'nihilism of Black America', and then the fetishization of nihilism by drill's consumers constitutes an unexplained omission. Also absent is a discussion of how drill culture relates to wider spectacles of violence, not least to the shock and awe of imperial war. How else can the neighbourhood moniker *Chiraq* be understood?

The final silence concerns the aforementioned avenues for humanisation – the stated intention of the book. Moving against the grain of the liberal frame, our critical reading (as in critical theory) has allowed for a contingent understanding of drill to emerge, in with the barter of life is not conditioned against an imagined liberal good life; does not rest on the terms of a society which structures its oppression; but contains a range of alternative histories. There, acts of care and solidarity, presented largely through the Corner Boys peer relations, represent not a struggle for dignity but the ongoing contradiction between dominant strains of masculinity and entrepreneurialism *and* patterns of human relation and connection that deny the aggressive and atomising pull of hyper-capitalist life. We can further speculate, that if such contradictions are to be found in the relatively circumscribed institutions of the male peer group, they might also be noted in drill's expressive content, where art's more imaginative openings allow alternative versions of the social to persist. Here, musicians' feature slots, shared beats, and raw sonics, might not only reference the recurrent exploitation of surplus value, but also form part of an aesthetic history of gifting, demotics and dialogics, which however faint, contain different historical possibilities to the liberal ruse or the worst case scenario of capitalist excess. I have now come far from the text, but I have done so because it from this place that we might pick up where *Ballad of the Bullet* has helpfully allowed us to rest, which is to say, thinking about what is politically at stake in socially mediated music, on terms not set by liberalism.

Malcolm James, August 2020

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