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***Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music, and the Power of Online Infamy.* Forrest Stuart.  
Princeton University Press, 2020**

**Reviewed by: Lambros Fatsis, University of Brighton, UK**

As a drill music aficionado and a criminologist specialising in the policing of Black music subcultures, the publication of Forrest Stuart's new book filled me with excitement. Thumbing through its pages, my enthusiasm grew but for different reasons than I initially expected. Anticipating a fierce rebuttal of the policing *against* drill music, I ended up reading a sophisticated ethnography of young Black lives in Chicago's South Side. Instead of being disappointed by what I might have liked the book to do, however, I thoroughly enjoyed the book that its author intended to write by smuggling drill music into sociological scholarship as a medium through which social inequality is reflected, resisted and exploited.

*Ballad of the Bullet* follows a group of young drill rappers and their affiliates (nicknamed the Corner Boys) to explore the relationship of poor Black urban youth with drill music, as a cultural ecosystem which sustains them — financially as well as socially — in ways that are overlooked by the facile demonisation of this new rap subgenre in mainstream public, media and criminal justice discourse. A fine contribution to urban sociology, Stuart's book offers a sensitive, nuanced and thoughtful account of how "drillers" use smartphone technology, social media and rap music to give meaning, shape and purpose to life lived in society's margins. To achieve this, Stuart carefully dissects how drill music collectives consciously exploit stereotypes of violence, gangsterism and "ghetto life" as a sought-after commodity to be consumed online by followers whose clicks, views, likes and shares can and *do* yield material rewards. Bringing the online and the offline worlds in dialogue by showing the connections between them, Stuart's book invites us to think about how 'the digital economy and urban poverty collide' (3) by transforming the latter through the former into an online spectacle and a product for sale that can be mined as a resource for escaping the confines of urban marginality.

Building on this arresting insight, *Ballad of the Bullet* compels us to confront the political and socio-cultural forces that prompt impoverished young people to broadcast hyperbolic

representations of gang violence which commodify their experience of social exclusion in the hope that they might make money out of their own poverty. Anchoring much of the book to this argument, Stuart carefully draws our attention to the relationship between 'digital production, social stratification, and gang violence' (12) by making three main points that form the core of the book. Firstly, drill music is introduced as a resource for community-building among drillers, and a space where the experience of social marginalisation is articulated, negotiated and resisted through beats and rhymes. Secondly, digital technology is approached as a tool for staging and broadcasting lurid tales of gang rivalry, shootings and violent personas and thirdly, such posturing is linked to the promise of achieving fandom and upward mobility through sharing such content online. The role of musical and digital culture in understanding structural inequality therefore takes centre stage in *Ballad of the Bullet*, and is one of the book's undeniable strengths.

*Ballad of the Bullet* offers a brilliant analysis of the high hopes that the digital economy manufactures for those who are otherwise denied secure employment, decent housing, access to healthcare, equal educational opportunities and fair treatment by the criminal justice system. In doing so, Stuart grounds his observations in the fictionally-named Taylor Park neighbourhood of Chicago's South Side — where the Corner Boys live — but also zooms out to link his ethnographic fieldwork to broader social realities, using the one to understand and explain the other. This allows Stuart to discuss a broad range of issues with illustrative and memorable examples. Of particular criminological importance is the description of the Corner Boys' desperation to 'authenticate their violent personas' by 'upload[ing] images of themselves brandishing guns, drugs, cash and other items related to street hustling' (80). Lacking access to such accessories of criminal lifestyle on a regular basis, the Corner Boys 'snapped dozens of photos, sometimes wearing a variety of outfits and set against different backgrounds' (81) to ensure a steady flow of social media posts that would lend them instant credibility as fearful gang members. Reflecting on the allure of online infamy, Stuart attunes us to the power it exerts on the Corner Boys' minds as a saleable asset, but also highlights the dangers of pandering to the voyeuristic demand for such content by affluent, white middle-class fans. By opening the doors to 'digital

slumming' (153) the Corner Boys may 'benefit from the commodification of ghetto stigma, 'but are also implicated in its negative consequences' (13). Cynically exploiting their own stigmatisation in exchange for recognition, material rewards and the prospect of stardom, the Corner Boys capitalise on the very stereotypes that were created to demean them by playing the role of the hardened criminal as 'ghetto ambassadors' (153-164), or even becoming 'sexual tourist attractions' for women who would travel to Taylor Park for the sheer 'transgressive thrill of bedding down "real gangbangers"' (164).

By discussing such incidents, *Ballad of the Bullet* offers us a valuable compendium of stories with which to fight against the criminalisation of drill music and other Black music subcultures like it (Fatsis, 2019a; 2019b), by reminding us that much of the content that offends white mainstream civil society is the very content that drill rappers produce for white audience consumption. As Stuart himself puts it, '[w]e shouldn't lose sight of the fact that these digital production practices are, at the end of the day, a *reaction* to America's grossly unequal distribution of wealth, power, and status. They're a response to racial and class oppression' (205). Such a close-up account of the Corner Boys' life is important, not only as a testament to the power of ethnography in making us attentive to the experience of people that are made vulnerable to violence and harm by patterns of social inequality and exclusion. It also invites us to think about how the disparities of the offline world migrate online, creating a continuum of social injustice across different modes of social life.

For anyone interested in urban sociology, cultural criminology, social media and contemporary Black music subcultures *Ballad of the Bullet* is a must-read. Its steadfast defence of culture as an arena where the social and the political are played out is illuminating and inspiring, as is its surgical attention to the interaction between society and technology in shaping each other. If I could change anything, that would be what I perceive as a reluctance to discuss the criminalisation of drill music. While the book does mention that police forces scour drillers' social media content looking for "evidence" of criminal activity, this is afforded only a few oblique references. Equally, I found the use of the term "gangs" and the description of drill music as "'shooting music"' (3) slightly problematic given that both terms carry negative racial(ised) connotations that are seized

upon by law enforcement agencies as excuses to single young Black people out, as a threatening presence that warrants surveillance and heavy-handed policing tactics. While there is some discussion on the complexity of the term “gang” in the form of endnotes (226, 228), the same caution is not exercised in the rest of the book or the book’s title for that matter. The description of drill merely as a slang term for shooting is also somewhat simplistic if not a little misleading, given that this is not all that drill is or indeed what all drill is. While Stuart does offer a more faithful description of drill that captures the complexities of the genre, this appears only as an endnote (223-224). Such objections can easily be dismissed as signs of oversensitivity on my part. Yet, I do fear that uncritical use of such value-laden terms serve to normalise and legitimise them by disguising the discriminatory work that they do. As a counterpoint to *Ballad of the Bullet* I would recommend Joy White’s (2020) *Terraformed* for a UK discussion of ‘young Black lives in the inner city’ as the book’s subtitle has it, alongside Nielson and Dennis’ (2019) *Rap on Trial* which offers a concise take on the policing and prosecuting of rap music in the US.

Overall, I found *Ballad of the Bullet* to be a remarkable text that speaks eloquently and with much imaginative force to themes of contemporary urban and digital social life. Whatever objections I may have raised, (un)fortunately reflect the limits of my own perspective rather than the shortcomings of this truly impressive addition to the hitherto slim literature on drill music on both sides of the Atlantic.

## References

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