
Playing Hide and Seek with Trident: Nihilism, Community, and UK Drill

Joe Luna*¹

¹University of Sussex – United Kingdom

Abstract

The paper begins by recounting the racist historian David Starkey's assertion on British prime-time television in 2011 that the explanation for the London riots of that year was that 'the whites have become black', and that a 'nihilistic gangster culture' had become the norm for British inner-city youth. I contextualise Starkey's outburst first in relation to the racist state narratives of post-war Britain, before unpacking 'nihilistic' in relation to the centuries-long history of the derogatory ascription of the terms *nihilist* and *nihilism*. I briefly sketch the philological history of 'nihilist' from Jacobi to its recent recovery in continental philosophy and black nihilism.

The rest of the paper listens to some examples of UK drill, drawing on signal works and critiques of black nihilism in the process. I argue that what makes drill so terrifying to its detractors is its ability to dramatize black life responding, in David Marriott's words, 'to its own deadly impersonation as the performance of a corpse'. Refusing the legitimacy of all forms of political authority save that of extrajudicial violence, drillers forge forms of sociality out of the very matter of social death.

Through its extremes of style and bravado, drill fashions a fugitive comradeship. Suspect raps: 'We don't fuck with pigs and vermin / Round here 999 is a no no no but you don't speak German', his multi-lingual pun a lyrical shibboleth that asserts the inadmissibility of any external claims to authority, whether opp (opposing gang member) or cop.

I read drill's gamified hyper-violence against the claims made about it and on its behalf by both its racist detractors and its liberal-left defenders. Drawing on Calvin Warren's claim that 'the Politics of hope preserve metaphysical structures that sustain black suffering', I situate drill in a hopeless environment, arguing that it weaponizes hopelessness as an affront against those who would simply wish away the conditions in which it is produced. I conclude by suggesting that drill's celebrations of wounding, killing, and criminal enterprise refuse and interrupt the ideological coherence of a criminal justice system that upholds the preservation of life as a non-negotiable bottom line whilst perpetually manufacturing life-destroying, racist criminalisation.

Joe Luna is the author of several books of poetry and many essays. Between 2011 and 2020 he ran the Hi Zero poetry reading series in Brighton, an archive of which can be found here. He works at the University of Sussex. <https://www.hizero.org/>

*Speaker