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Author Meets Critics

Eric Drott, *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-4780-2574-0 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-2099-8 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4780-2787-4 (ebook)

"Music", the cultural studies scholar Barry Shank wrote in 2014, "is the absolutely undeniable evidence of the sociality of human feeling" (Shank 2014: 14). Could it ever come to pass that anything as obvious this—no less than the idea of *music as inherently social*—could be in jeopardy? A thousand flourishing artists in a thousand music scenes disproves the notion. But one might be permitted to hesitate at Shank's proposition *at least a little* when recalling the dark months of 2020—when tours were put on hiatus, and long-running show venues were shuttered; when bands disassembled at record rates; and music, if present amongst us, was sounding the deep fragmentation of our lives as it filtered through the individuating screens of our myriad digital devices…

Eric Drott's brilliant book, *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital*, is not about the pandemic. But one can't help but consider this not-yet-dissipated moment of collective biopolitical life when assessing its implications. In the year before COVID-19 hit, music streaming platforms were amassing one trillion streams per annum. They were earning the major labels $8 billion in profits. COVID-19 would accelerate these tendencies, further emboldening a music industry that was in dire straits only a half-decade earlier. The effects of the shift to streaming continue to reverberate throughout the industry. As Drott, a professor of music theory at UT-Austin, shows, streaming has meant major changes in the production, consumption, dissemination, and valuation of music. These changes are guided by one of streaming's foundational propositions: that music depart from a logic of possession (e.g. owning and exchanging albums), into a logic of "temporary and conditional access" (p.2). Alongside subscription-based access has come new methods of playlisting and copyright enforcement; increasingly sophisticated calculations of listening metrics; new kinds of user-data collection; new kinds of music; even new conceptualizations of societal and economic value—all richly explored in this book.

Music streaming is clearly about more than the economy of music. It is also a story of the epochal contradictions of platform capitalism, where lowered barriers to entry and promises of plenitude are meted out alongside new forms of monopoly power and rent. Music streaming is of a piece with new cultures of sound surveillance, and contests over art qua commodity—both involving complex questions of where all the labour is. At the same time, *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital* makes clear that streaming *music*—as a particular kind of socio-cultural idea and temporalized art-form—carries unique contradictions, costs, and opportunities, requiring specific kinds of analytic and theoretical tools. A summation of this idea is given early on, with Drott's claim that "streaming generalizes music as an aggregation of particulars, at the same time as it hails the public as a series of atomized individuals" (p.5). What ensues is not a case study of a particular firm or sector involved in the streaming economy. Rather, Drott offers a synoptic assessment of what we might call "value-in-streaming", built around a series of observed dynamics. Among these, three strike us as worth highlighting:

[i] Today's ubiquitous steaming platform (e.g., Tidal, Deezer, Spotify) is not simply the technology of music distribution; but "also and more significantly a technology of wealth redistribution" (p.4).

[ii] Streaming allows capitalists to harness music's unique socio-material capacities—including its status as both a representational and non-representational phenomenon—within dubious social projects, including digital labour discipline, the development of novel property regimes, and mass social surveillance.

[iii] In working to decommodify music, a multi-billion-dollar streaming economy has progressively decommodified the labour upon which thousands of musician/workers depend. This is a process with dire social consequences. Potentially, it is also one which supports liberatory political horizons, including through the creation of new public utilities and unions.

Were it content to simply to diagnose streaming in this way, *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital* would be a commendable and worthwhile read. But a particular merit of this book, and one we elaborate on here, consists in the probing implications it offers to geography, a discipline still only toe-deep into streaming and its spatial effects. To tell the story of music streaming, Drott draws from a wealth of critical geographical thinkers—including Brett Christophers, J.K. Gibson-Graham, and Jason Moore. He addresses a range of

contemporary disciplinary interests—the digitization of capitalism, corporate surveillance, the effects of neoliberal deregulation, ideologies of nature, and e-waste. And his detailed studies maintain a normative thrust that many geographers—including readers of this journal—may find both welcome and useful.

Our engagement with *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital* came in the context of a new graduate geography class at Clark University, "The Politics of Sensing", taught by Max Ritts (a co-author here). In formulating this response, we sought to consider its implications with respect to a broadly construed "sensory turn" developing in geography (evident in spaces as disparate as smart cities and conservation bioacoustics). And the same time, we also sought to connect our extant interests in economic geography, cultural geography, and queer theory. Striking a hopeful register, we have sought to affirm in here something of the sociality question Drott's book raised for us, specifically by writing this collectively—and against the atomized social forms streaming privileges.

In Chapter 1, Drott probes one of streaming's central ideological tenants: its promise of "seamless" and "frictionless" musical experience. Using mediation theory, he shows how seamless access relies upon a series of transactions of which most streaming users are only dimly aware. While the result suggests a familiar kind of fetishism—the commodity belying its dispersed and largely invisible material social relations—Drott is at pains to show how streaming also connotes a new phase in capitalism's "ever-widening gulf between producers and consumers of goods" (p.41). The Content Delivery Networks (CDNs) "bringing content close to end users" (p.15) cohere a truly bewildering assortment of material and semiotic elements (intellectual property rights, metadata, distributed music labour, and a whole host of spatially distributed signal traffic). Moreover, "seamless" streaming requires the dispersal not only of carbon emissions, megawatt hours, but also new intellectual property regimes, digital infrastructures, and labour markets (explored in depth in Chapter 4). With streaming platforms, capitalism's historical separations of use and exchange value reveal an increasingly digitized world of materiality and abstraction—marked by "innovations" in economic exchange (e.g. subscription plan pricing), cascading online "traffic", and mountains of e-waste. In a beautiful passage on page 47, Drott considers the temporal shifts that have accompanied the transition from a world of musical objects into one of service subscriptions: "By making this peculiar kind of digital good vanish almost as soon as it is fabricated,

platforms manage to rob it of a key feature conventionally associated with goods: the particular relation they institute between present and future." All that is solid melts into stream.

The topic of capitalist dematerialization continues into Chapter 2, which Drott opens with a now infamous David Bowie quote: "Music itself is going to become like running water or electricity" (p.63). Drott uses Bowie's prophetic 2002 remark to probe long-running musical associations with "water" and "flow"—notions central to streaming's ideologies of access—as well to preview the public utility debate that stands as one of streaming's more utopian horizons (on which, more later). For us, further questions might be adduced here: if Chapter 2 neatly outlines the constituent parts of streaming's political economy, what might it reveal about other economic flows? Economic geographers are increasingly concerned with the platform economy as an infrastructure of daily life. The opportunity to consider the stream through flows in global production networks (GPNs) struck us as an interesting "next step" to Drott's engagement (e.g. Coe and Yeung 2015). What might the music commodity focus reveal about the ascendant role of platforms as "intermediaries" in GPNs, in ways other digital commodities would not? What new social-spatial configurations emerge here? And as older economic geographies of music production/distribution become replaced by the stream, what opportunities do they in turn extend to emergent forms of capitalist salvage?

Another line of interest for us in Chapter 2 is streaming's relationship to a generalized economy of affect. Music is a unique cultural good, Drott notes, for the way it combines representational (e.g. symbolic) and non-representational elements (e.g. affect). Through targeted market strategy, streaming has progressively rationalized these "non-representational" features in the service of immaterial labour productivity: "mood playlists" for head-phoned subjects in cafés, "workout mixes" for the gyms in downtown co-working spaces, etc. Once again, our thoughts turned to geographical implications: what might a neighbourhood- or urban-scale analysis of this digital musical affect economy reveal—and at a time when municipal governments are scheming to update Richard Florida's (2010) "Creative Class" narratives of elite spatiality with new forms like the "Playground City"?[1] What is the officialized "sound" of Brooklyn in 2023—if no longer the street anthems of now

[1] See https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/05/10/opinion/nyc-office-vacancy-playground-city.html (last accessed 5 February 2024).

bygone eras of hip hop, might it be found inside the earbuds streaming "Chill" tracks behind panes of gentrified storefront windows and computer glass?

Chapter 3 delves into streaming's significance for consumer surveillance, as linked to the extraction of two resources in particular: listener attention and user data. Building on the work of Tia DeNora (2000), Drott considers how streaming expands music's capacity to function as a site of neoliberal self-modulation. Streaming platforms exploit the ways users associate musical selection with their "authentic selves", enabling the expanded collection and exploitation of user data as more and more spaces become utilized for stream-based listening. In effect, "partially-decommodified" platform music becomes a vehicle for the commodification of other things—including other sites of profit-making (e.g. advertising). Through streaming, the neoliberal emphasis on authenticity comes to significantly influence the production side of the equation, too, encouraging artists to optimize their compositions for streaming in terms of length, tone, and style. Drott shows how the livestreaming economy, as presented on platforms like YouTube, is influencing new micro-genres and playlists (along with their raced and gendered biases). Together, these dynamics raise pertinent questions about surveillance capitalism's expanded powers. Your "Morning Shower" playlist should never sound the same.

Chapter 4 invited rich questions into to the so-called "attention economy", in particular, through an exegesis of the new kinds of "sonic forgery" (our phrase) that have begun to proliferate through the social uptake of streaming. "Fake artists", "soundalikes", and "spam music" represent the prospect of accruing value without necessarily compensating an associated artist—who typically would receive revenue shares based on the number of streams their track accrues in a reporting period. Exemplifying their ascendance, a whopping 94% of the iTunes search results produced for "Rihanna" consist of covers, duplicates, and karaoke versions. One of the significant features of this development, Drott notes, is the way it foregrounds novel challenges inherent in a long running digital capitalist ambition: monetizing user-attention. Presumably, it is a human streaming the Rihanna track, and hence realizing its value. But like the deep-fake composer, this determination has become hard for providers to make under streaming's multiplying of accounts and indexing strategies, not to mention concurrent temporalities of musical experience. These ambiguities of listener

identity expose larger contradictions of digital capitalism, as well as the longer histories of capitalism in music, with capital's attempts to disavow music labour as labour.

A little less worked out for us is the consequent effect of musical "cheapness". As Drott notes, iTunes, Spotify, and other streaming services are now plagued with pseudo-duplicates, alternate versions, and AI covers. The problem has not been an easy one to solve; moreover, it is not necessarily one which streaming providers *want* to solve—owing to some of the profitability strategies of the sector in question. What seems nevertheless plausible is that capitalism's relentless search for "cheapness"—as discussed by the likes of Raj Patel and Jason Moore (2017)—has produced denigrative cultural goods in the realm of music. Certainly, there is anecdotal evidence for this in now commonplace observations of our impoverished listening culture: if nothing else, we spend more and more time sifting through the same playlists, primed to the consumption of shorter, hook-based songs thanks to the way streams are valued. But is this always true? Drott's critique of "cheapness" (e.g. p.160) felt, if anything, insufficiently dialectical, given its wide possible implications. Could "cheapness" be another modernist swipe at novel artforms and post-modern pastiche? What new or recombinant music forms does "cheapness" make possible? This book might have made more room for aesthetic inquiry. We also wanted more on the socio-spatial *effects* of cheapness, particularly in its extra-musical implications. How might cheapness work in connection to the racializing tendencies that have long been a part of pop music's co-optation strategies? Perhaps we are too early into the streaming era to have evidence speaking to these concerns, but some hypothesizing would have been welcomed.

In Chapter 5, Drott brings streaming into dialogue with the general crisis of social reproduction. Grounding his arguments in theories of feminist political economy and media studies, he considers the revealing prominence of mood, activity, and context-based playlists in streaming—which tend to "privilege self-care at the expense of collective care" (p.201). "Cheapness" makes a return here in an assessment of the "cheap" services steaming offers in the form of productivity enhancements (workouts, sleep, typing, etc.). Especially effective for us is Drott's consideration of feminized labour, and his observation of the way activities as intimate as child-rearing can be outsourced to stream-based services. Subjected to the stream, young listeners (e.g. children) are bombarded by advertisements that "train" them to use the same services as adults, perpetuating the productivity mantra that underlies middle-class

consumerism, not to mention its raced and gendered ideals. The invocation of Lee Edelman (2004) in this context is apt, cementing Drott's critique of the way "main*stream*" cultures (music, film, etc.) support heteropatriarchal working ideals. All of this focusing on labour returns us to the contradiction Drott notes at the outset: "the more platforms frame music as a resource for living, the more the living of musicians is threatened" (p.20).

The book's concluding chapter turns to the assessment of streaming's labour politics during the heights of Covid. Drott identifies 2020 as "a pivot in the brief history of music streaming" (p.235), with grassroots mobilization and public pressure finally bursting into public arenas. Accordingly, he overviews some of the transformative possibilities that musicians and their allies in the creative sectors are pursuing today with growing conviction, e.g. increasing minimum pay-out rates guaranteed to artists, changing platform revenue sharing models, developing platform cooperatives, and perhaps most hopefully, seeking ways to re-imagine streaming platforms as truly *public* utilities, not unlike the water or electricity authorities that must also feature in our energy transitions. The fact that this review was completed during the Hollywood strike points to real urgency here; with its suggestion that streaming battles come during a broad rethink of creative labour in the digital era.

In critically unpacking the ways streaming both valorises "idled assets" within the market and seeks to further entangle social life within its dynamics, *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital* offers rich insights into the ubiquitous digital logics of our time: datafication, optimization, platformization, surveillance. Drott's book reveals the varied ways the geography of digital music defies national geographical boundaries, while remaining dependent upon upon the state's nested spatial orders (e.g. via labour markets, cultures of identification, IP). At one point, Drott invokes Gibson-Graham's (1996) infamous "iceberg metaphor"—with its evocation of the deep material realities upon which capitalist life sits. Drott's aim here is to show how streaming's political economy also relies upon various "non-economic" factors. Yet, interestingly, his analysis does not broach a key site Gibson-Graham (1996: 8) explore, i.e. the "household as the space of 'consumption' (of capitalist commodities) and of 'reproduction' (of the capitalist workforce)"—not simply "a space of noncapitalist production and consumption". The "household", feminist geography has revealed, is spatially *and* economically variegated, and has undergone various modulations in the digital era. We wondered what a more throughgoing critique of the household might have

produced here, given that streaming follows an era of musical "bedroom producers", and is only further ensconced in the domestic spaces where online music was disproportionately consumed during the pandemic.[2]

If anything, these questions are grounds for more engagement with Drott's book. *Streaming Music, Streaming Capital* deserves very high praise. Crucial work has been done here to situate the politics of streaming, with implications that stretch far beyond music. What further applications of the "geographical imagination" (Gregory 1994) could do with Drott's project is something we await with excitement.

[2] The rise of the "bedroom producers" who shortly preceded (anticipated?) streaming in the late aughts. For example, see the work of Nosaj Thing (Kid Cudi, Chance The Rapper), Steve Lacy (Mac Miller, Kendrick Lamar), and with great fanfare, Bon Iver's "For Emma, Forever Ago".

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