FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 26 | Spring 2018

Title	The Real Deal: Hip-hop Mixtape Artwork and Black Masculinity
Author	Emmett Robinson Smith
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	26
Issue Date	Spring 2018
Publication Date	11/06/2018
Editors	Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo and Valentina P. Aparicio

The Real Deal: Hip-hop Mixtape Artwork and Black Masculinity

Emmett Robinson Smith
University of Western Ontario

Despite hip-hop's status as a means of resistance to myriad systems of institutionalized racism, oppression, and poverty, its rise in mainstream popularity has caused a dramatic increase in its corporate monetization. This causes a transfer of control from the artist to the record label, at times jeopardizing hip-hop's fundamental principles of rebellion, resistance, and risk. An alternative mode of expression, however – the mixtape – puts power back into the hands of hip-hop artists, becoming a crucial vessel for unmitigated artistic expression and meaning. One of the most significant and immediately striking aspects of the mixtape is the cover art. By honing in on the visual aspects of five select mixtapes, it becomes evident that the images presented on their covers advance male hip-hop artists' freedom of expression of black masculinity. These images, though at times problematic in their own way, become a crucial source of meaning not only in the realm of hip-hop, but in the genre's relationship with broader societal perceptions of the black male.

Despite hip-hop music's status as a means of resistance to myriad systems of institutionalized racism, oppression, and poverty, its rise in mainstream popularity has been facilitated by a dramatic increase in its corporate monetization. This has resulted at times in a watered-down version of the form, with heightened corporate authority limiting artistic expression to an extent as hip-hop artists must fulfill the demands of their record labels. One medium of hip-hop expression, however, has consistently put the control back into the hands of artists, yielding an increased freedom in rappers' means of expression and self-presentation. This medium is mixtape—specifically, its cover art. Because mixtapes traditionally carry no relationship with the record labels that major rappers work for, they and their covers are a vital, unhindered means of expression for rappers who might otherwise be encumbered by label demands. By focusing on the visual aspects of select mixtapes, it becomes evident that the images presented on their covers advance male hip-hop artists' freedom of expression of black masculinity. After examining the cover art for Future's *Super Future*, Gucci Mane's *Burrock Obama,* The Empire, DJ 2Mello & Gucci Mane's *Gucci Gang Bang – R&B Edition*, DJ Coolbreeze and Lil Wayne's *My Own Worst Enemy Part Five* and Rick Ross's *F*ck the Rap Game*, it is clear that mixtape artwork depicts black male artists in various positions of power that are not necessarily available in mass-media presentations of hip-hop. More broadly, the uncompromising nature of mixtape cover art is a powerful agent in challenging the longstanding marginalization of black men in Western society.

Hip-hop's shift into the capitalist mainstream has been well-documented. Scholars such as Simona J. Hill and Dave Ramsaran elucidate that this transformation has only expanded the hegemony that hip-hop originally sought to subvert (137). As culture critic Yvonne Bynoe illustrates in *Stand and Deliver*, "Hip-

hop culture's co-option by 'Corporate America' and 'Madison Avenue' may have stripped it of its radicalism. Realistically, how revolutionary can a 'Hip Hop Movement' be if its primary motivator is a market-driven entertainment identity?" (21). Because of its abstinence from monetization, however, the mixtape has mitigated this contradiction to an extent:

> Thanks to the vacuum of regulation that the mixtape market operates in, the artwork of mixtape covers has evolved into … an extreme form of communication, unapologetic in its nature, where the name of the game is to turn heads and grab attention. Absent are the *Parental Advisory* stickers or strict criteria that must be met to get an album on Walmart's shelves, creating an aesthetic with zero restrictions on explicit content, sexuality, drug references or graphic violence. (Hansson & Thornby 3)

As a result, the worlds that mixtapes and their cover art create is exaggerated, realistic yet fantasized, at times poignant, other times highly offensive, and often both. One of the common threads between many of them is how black masculinity is represented in these visual texts.

Race and culture scholar Paul Gilroy invokes Stuart Hall's suggestion that "race is the modality in which class is lived" (Hall 137) by applying the same framework to race-gender relationships:

> An amplified and exaggerated masculinity has become the boastful centrepiece of a culture of compensation that self-consciously salves the misery of the disempowered and subordinated. This masculinity and its relational feminine counterpart become special symbols of the difference that race makes. (Gilroy 85)

In keeping with this "amplified and exaggerated masculinity," hip-hop is for the most part governed by a relatively conservative set of rules regarding what it means to be an authentic black male rapper. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, in his book *Hip-Hop Revolution*, identifies three key aspects of hip-hop masculinity: "(1) willful ability to inflict harm on adversaries, (2) willful ability to have sex with many women, (3) access to material resources that are largely inaccessible to others" (75). While these definitions of masculinity are not necessarily characteristic of the genre as a whole, they are apparent in myriad hip-hop locations that range from mass-media hip-hop to smaller-scale forms such as the mixtape. While these aspects of hip-hop masculinity can be read as generalized or stereotypical, it becomes more and more apparent that mixtape cover art complicates these stereotypes by flipping them into deliberate assertions of empowerment.

The aforementioned elements of hip-hop masculinity are in direct connection with hip-hop's contextual use of the word "nigga," a term which has been reclaimed by the hip-hop community as an indicator of a specific type of masculinity: "'Nigga' … reflects the specific class, race, and gendered experiences of young males in urban centers in the last decades of the 20th century … 'Nigga' as an identity is directly linked to the ghetto and not simply to skin color" (Worsley 108). Despite its use as an empowering term in hip-hop, it remains usable for a slim demographic in music and in society. Thus, these elements—

race, class—qualify hip-hop masculinity and the ideal of the "nigga" through the modality that Gilroy suggests. "Nigga" also carries a strong connection with hip-hop authenticity, or "realness," encapsulated in R.A.T. Judy's "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity":

> The status as being at once both rooted in experience and available for appropriation marks nigga as the function by which diverse quotidian experiences and expressions are "authenticated" as viable resistance to the dominant forms of power. (229)

This type of "authenticated" resistance, whereby male hip-hop artists present themselves in alignment with "nigga authenticity" as a means of challenging hegemonic forces, is highly visible on mixtape cover art. By analyzing five different mixtape covers by black male hip-hop artists, it is apparent that the mixtape cover is an ideal platform for the performance of this type authenticity.

One of the more striking uses of the term "nigga" in the mixtape context is the cover of DJ Coolbreeze and Lil Wayne's *My Own Worst Enemy Part Five*, illustrated by renowned mixtape cover artist Miami Kaos. The mixtape's illustrated cover features Lil Wayne in front of a brick wall, dressed in an orange prison jumpsuit, holding a pistol to his head. Perched on his left shoulder is a miniature winged Wayne, representing his good conscience. More striking, however, is the demonic Wayne on his right shoulder, smiling devilishly. From this figure emanates a speech bubble that reads, "Do it nigga!" The mixtape preceded Wayne's eight-month incarceration for criminal possession of a weapon (Kreps), further emphasizing its "realness". While it is unclear as to whether or not this mixtape cover is a commentary on the racism that pervades the United States judicial system, what *is* evident is that the artwork for *My Own Worst Enemy Part Five* still succeeds in instilling Wayne with power despite the caged environment depicted on the cover. If his incarceration is out of his hands, at least, as he holds the gun to his head, he has control over his existence. Because the word "nigga" is so intertwined with hip-hop realness, the inclusion of the "Do it, Nigga!" speech bubble on the cover of this mixtape reinforces Wayne's status as an authentic black male rapper. And, because criminality and its glamorization have often been an indicators of black masculinity in hip-hop (see Spencer) —which further demonstrates the countercultural and rebellious nature of the genre—the depiction of Lil Wayne in prison reinforces his status as "real." While some of hip-hop's attitudes towards criminality have frequently been used as a scapegoat for the dismissal of the genre as ultimately harmful to African-Americans (Maine), Wayne's freedom of self-presentation on *My Own Worst Enemy Part Five* is empowering.

Competition among artists, which has long been a staple of hip-hop culture, is a similarly dynamic source of empowerment for black male rappers. The genre has frequently been likened to a sport, epitomized by Kendrick Lamar's infamous "Control" verse: "What is competition? I'm tryna raise the bar high / Who tryna jump and get it? You're better off tryna skydive." The competitive nature of hip-hop is often pushed to its ethical limits on the covers of mixtapes, often to the point when cover artists are advised not to release them. In an interview, mixtape cover artist Miami Kaos says:

> "I had Jay-Z picking up Lil Wayne by his throat and Jay is simply shooting Wayne. People knowing me who saw it were like, 'don't show this to anybody … don't let them see it, it wouldn't be good for you if they saw something like this.'" (75)

Mixtapes frequently present images of rappers killing each other, harkening back to Ogbar's assertion of the hypermasculine rapper's "willful ability to inflict harm on adversaries" (75). Rick Ross's 2010 mixtape *F*ck The Rap Game* is one of the more explicit examples of this outlook. Released at the zenith of a seemingly perpetual beef with rapper 50 Cent (Yoh), KidEight's cover art, set in a slaughterhouse, features Rick Ross standing in blood-spattered butcher's apparel and holding a cleaver while the corpses of various livestock hang from the rafters. On a scale rests the severed head of 50 Cent, who gazes directly at the viewer with a pained expression on his face. While the image is certainly over-the-top, its life-or-death nature in the context of hip-hop competition amplifies the high-stakes realness of hip-hop beef, taken to its most tragic and most visible ends in the still-unsolved murders of Tupac Shakur and Christopher Wallace, also known as the Notorious B.I.G. (Bourland). Miami Kaos's reluctance to show some of his sketches to the larger hip-hop community is evidence of hip-hop's stark, down-to-earth, purview. Because creative decisions in hip-hop can often open up potentially violent repercussions, the type of authenticity that is fundamental to the genre only becomes more evident. Furthermore, because hip-hop authenticity is clearly so closely intertwined with a certain type of masculinity, the violent self-depictions that are presented on mixtape covers are a way for some rappers to assert themselves as simultaneously authentic, masculine, and empowered.

Despite the freedom of masculine expression on mixtape covers, this at times comes at a price. As Zoe Spencer writes in her rather scathing critique of masculine hip-hop culture, "From Lil' Wayne to, yes, even Beyoncé, the celebration of murder, misogyny, and mayhem is ever so prevalent" (99). Women—especially black women—are frequently on the covers of mixtapes, but are presented overwhelmingly as little more than sex objects. This is hardly new for hip-hop, though the imagery on some mixtape covers is particularly egregious. The Empire, DJ 2Mello & Gucci Mane's *Gucci Gang Bang – R&B Edition* is a prime example of this. Drawn, again by Miami Kaos, at the centre of the cover is a naked black woman, breasts exposed, while six black men surround her, as one of them appears to ejaculate inside her. This is an especially vivid example of the tradition of designating black women as the disposable "other" in hip-hop culture: "there was and remains a homoerotic quality to hip hop culture … that makes women seem aside from sex, non-essential" (Rebollo-Gil & Moras 129). The homoeroticism is evident here, but more importantly, its reduction of this black woman is indicative of an inclination that has long been pervasive in the genre:

> In rap, women's voices are actively silenced through sex and/or rape. The violence of the sexual act in men's tales of conquest focuses on making the black female body silent, on meticulously reducing women's selfhood to the physical and then fracturing and severing parts of that physicality until what remains is self-less, senseless, fuck-able and mute. (Rebollo-Gil & Moras 10-11)

The artwork for *Gucci Gang Bang – R&B Edition* explicitly positions the black woman in this way. While the image presented on *Gucci Gang Bang* is hardly constructive, it, like many mixtape covers, presents the artist in an explicit position of great power. Indeed, power—the lack of it, its acquisition—is a central currency of hip-hop, a currency which mixtape artwork displays without compromise.

Mixtape cover art simultaneously subverts and reifies both fantastic and real-world occurrences and ideas, functioning as a vessel for depictions of power. While some, like *My Own Worst Enemy Part Five* and *Gucci Gang Bang*, are deliberately shocking, some present more progressive power dynamics previously unattained not only in hip-hop. As Hansson and Thornby write, mixtape cover art thus becomes a mode of communication not necessarily contingent on the music contained within:

> As mixtape covers began taking on current events, they increasingly became a form of communication on their own, as artists became well aware that their cover art could be a more effective medium to send a message than the lyrics in their music. (7)

As a result, mixtape artwork serves as an immediately noticeable vessel for the reclamation of identity and the stereotypes that often tend to come with it. This is evident on the cover of Gucci Mane's *Burrock Obama* mixtape, designed by English artist KidEight. Released in 2010, two years after Barack Obama's rise to the presidency, the cover features Gucci Mane as Obama, standing behind a podium in front of the White House. Behind him is a sign featuring Gucci Mane with the word "BURR" below his image, where the word "HOPE" would be on the now-iconic, street-art-influenced Obama poster (see Bailey and Hanley). Barack Obama's election caused a slew of positive political messages in the hip-hop realm, though *Burrock Obama*'s is one of the most vivid: "prior to the 2008 election of Barack Obama, relations between hip-hop's commercial vanguard and the political establishment were growing more contentious, as George W. Bush became a favorite target among dissenting rap stars" (Jeffries, "Obama Era" 315). Hip-hop artists flipped this script considerably upon the election of Barack Obama, as an influx of mixtapes, songs, and music videos invoked Obama not only as President, but as a hip-hop icon—even though Obama's relationship with hip-hop was contradictory at best (see Jeffries, "Obama Era"), Obama at times distanced himself from hip-hop songs that invoked him, but his governance allowed hip-hop artists such as Gucci Mane to fantasize about achieving positions of power that were previously unprecedented for black men. Gucci Mane's *Burrock Obama* cover seems to suggest the question, "If Obama can do it, why not me?" As Obama stated, "not only is hip-hop a reflection of reality, in some cases it shapes reality" (Jeffries 203). The cover of *Burrock Obama* does both.

This reclamation and reshaping of black masculine identity is reinforced in the cinema-inspired artwork of many mixtapes. The imitation of iconic movie posters is a common motif; *Avatar, Fantastic Four, Captain America,* and even *Clockwork Orange* have all been the inspiration for various mixtape covers. Future's 2012 mixtape *Super Future* is a vital example of the tendency not only to riff off movie posters, but, more specifically, superhero movie posters. *Super Future*'s cover, again by KidEight, presents a close-up illustration of a man (presumably Future) parting his jacket and business shirt with his hands to reveal blue spandex with a logo similar to Superman's on the chest. The reference to the iconic (white) character Clark Kent is obvious; "Super Future" has been an alias of Future's for some

time. Work has been done on the normalization of the white superhero in North American popular culture (see Cochran). As Tyree and Jacobs write, "Black imagery was formulated through the normative order of White supremacy, which distorted Blacks' cultural and human appearances, relegated them to particular roles, and created a subordinate relationship with Whites" (3). The *Super Future* cover moves directly against this narrow view of black men in cinema; it places power back into representations of the black male in a space that has historically never afforded him this identity.

In recent years, the line between the "mixtape" and the "album" has become increasingly blurred as major artists like Drake release collections under the title of "commercial mixtape" or "playlist" (see Plaugic and Singleton, and Friedman). As the gradual dominance of streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music put the music increasingly in flux, it is difficult to predict what this will mean for the mixtape (see Luca and McFadden). Will mixtape cover art be compromised? Or will it only increase artists' impetus to offer even more remarkable imagery? Hip-hop's history of uncompromised artistry suggests the latter. Regardless, mixtape artwork is one of the few realms of popular culture that affords such unfettered artistic latitude to a demographic whose work has consistently been either exploited, diluted, or both by a hegemonic and whitewashed industry. The form, though often hyperbolic, deserves to be taken seriously, as it provides vital insight into the values that continue to shape hip-hop. And, as hip-hop increasingly becomes the mainstream, it is essential to analyze its relationship with society in broader terms.

Works Cited

Akbar, Na'im. *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*. Tallahassee, FL: Mind Productions & Associates, 1996. Print.

Bailey, Nathaniel, and Delinda Hanley. "'We the People' Posters an Iconic Image at Protests." *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, 36.2 (2017): 63. *ProQuest*. Web. https://www-lib-uwo-ca.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/docview/1870609066?accountid=15115. Accessed 29 April 2018.

Anderson, Sean, Kendrick Duckworth, and Timothy Thedford. "Control." Single. Big Sean. *G.O.O.D. Music*, 2013. Mp3.

Bourland, Ian. "Life After Death: Who Killed Tupac and Biggie?" *Frieze*. March 5, 2018. Web. https://frieze.com/article/life-after-death-who-killed-tupac-and-biggie. Accessed 16 April 2018.

Bynoe, Yvonne. *Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership, and Hip Hop Culture*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2004. Print.

Cochran, Danielle L. 2017. *Canvases of Representation: Addressing the Cultural Politics of Black Male Superhero Identity in Graphic Narratives*. Ph.D. diss., Illinois State University. Web. https://www-lib-uwo-ca.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/cgi-bin/ezpauthn.cgi?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/docview/1976972392?accountid=15115. Accessed 19 December 2017.

DJ Coolbreeze & Lil Wayne. *My Own Worst Enemy Part Five*. Miami Kaos, 2009. Web. http://www.therealspill.com/beatz4dastreetz/category/mix%20tape%20dont%20hate/15. Accessed 22 December 2017.

Friedman, Skinny. "The Real Difference Between a Mixtape and an Album." *Noisey*. December 10, 2013. Web. https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/rmx446/the-real-difference-between-a-mixtape-and-an-album. Accessed 21 December 2017.

Future. *Super Future*. Mixtape. KidEight, 2012. https://www.livemixtapes.com/mixtapes/18976/super-future-fire-marshal-future.html. Accessed 21 December 2017.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. Print.

Gucci Mane. *Burrock Obama*. Mixtape. Miami Kaos, 2010. Web. http://www.buymixtapes.com/Gucci-Mane-Burrock-Obama.9002.mixtape. Accessed 4 May 2018.

Gucci Mane. *Gucci Gang Bang – R&B Edition*. Mixtape. Miami Kaos, 2009. Web. http://www.buymixtapes.com/Gucci-Mane-Gucci-Gang-Bang-RnB-Edition.8694.mixtape. Accessed 22 December 2017.

Hall, Stuart. *Race: The Floating Signifier*. Transcription. *Media Education Foundation,* 1997. Web. http://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Race-the-Floating-Signifier-Transcript.pdf. Accessed 21 December 2017.

Hall, Stuart. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. Holmes & Meier, New York, 1978. Print.

Hansson, Tobias and Michael Thorsby. *Damn Son Where Did You Find This?: A Book About US Hiphop Mixtape Cover Art*. Köln/New York: Koenig Books, 2016. Print.

Harris, Veronica. "Hip hop dethrones rock as most consumed music genre in the U.S." NY Daily News. July 18, 2017. Web. http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/hip-hop-dethrones-rock-most-consumed-music-genre-u-s-article-1.3336085. Accessed 21 December 2017.

Hill, Simona J., and Dave Ramsaran. *Hip Hop and Inequality: Searching for the "Real" Slim Shady*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2009. Print.

Holloway, Daniel. "'Black Panther,' 'Luke Cage' and the Rise of Black Superheroes on Screen." *Variety*. August 16, 2017. Web. http://variety.com/2017/tv/news/black-superheros-black-panther-luke-cage-black-lightning-1202498790/. Accessed 21 December 2017.

Jackson, Ronald L., II. *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. Print.

Judy, R. A. T. "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity." *Boundary 2*, 21.3 (1994): 211–230. Web. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/303605. Accessed 29 April 2018.

Ogbar, Jeffrey, and Ogbonna Green. *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*. Lawrence, KS: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2007. Print.

Jeffries, Michael P. *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Print.

—. "'Where Ya at?' Hip-Hop's Political Locations in the Obama Era." *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, edited by Justin A. Williams. *Cambridge Companions to Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 314–26. Print.

Kreps, Daniel. "Lil Wayne Pleads Guilty to Gun Charges, Faces Year in Prison." *Rolling Stone*. October 22, 2009. Web. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/lil-wayne-pleads-guilty-to-gun-charges-faces-year-in-prison-20091022. Accessed 21 December 2017.

Luca, Michael, and Craig McFadden. "How Streaming Is Changing Music (Again)." *Harvard Business Review*. December 12, 2016. Web. https://hbr.org/2016/12/how-streaming-is-changing-music-again. Accessed 21 December 2017.

Maine, Samantha. "Fox News reporter Responds to Kendrick Lamar Diss, Says 'Hip-Hop has Done More Damage than Racism.'" *NME*. April 15, 2017. Web. http://www.nme.com/news/music/geraldo-rivera-responds-to-kendrick-lamar-diss-2050745. Accessed 21 December 2017.

Plaugic, Lizzie, and Micah Singleton. "Is Drake's New 'Playlist' an Evolution of Music or just Flashy Marketing?" *The Verge*. March 20, 2017. Web. https://www.theverge.com/2017/3/20/14985130/drake-more-life-album-playlist-apple-music-discussion. Accessed 21 December 2017.

Rebollo-Gil, Guillermo and Amanda Moras. "Black Women and Black Men in Hip Hop Music: Misogyny, Violence and the Negotiation of (White-Owned) Space." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45.1 (2012): 118-132. Web. https://journals-scholarsportal-info.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/pdf/00223840/v45i0001/118_bwabmivatnos.xml. Accessed 29 April 2018.

Rick Ross. *F*ck the Rap Game*. Mixtape. KidEight, 2010. Web. https://www.livemixtapes.com/mixtapes/12508/fck_the_rap_game.html. Accessed 22 December 2017.

Sharpley-Whiting, T. Denean. *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women*. New York: New York University Press, 2008. Print.

Spencer, Zoe. *Murda, Misogyny, and Mayhem: Hip-Hop and the Culture of Abnormality in the Urban Community*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011. Print.

Tia C. M. Tyree and Liezille J. Jacobs. "Can You Save Me?: Black Male Superheroes in Film." *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 3.1 (2014): 1-24. *JSTOR*. Web. https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/article/561686/pdf. Accessed 4 May 2018.

Worsley, Shawan M. *Audience, Agency and Identity in Black Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 2013. Print.

Yoh. "50 Cent & Rick Ross' Never-Ending Beef, A Complete History." *DJBooth*. January 18, 2016. Web. http://djbooth.net/news/entry/2016-01-18-history-50-cent-rick-ross-never-ending-beef. Accessed 21 December 2017.