Heroic scripts
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Heroic scripts

The case of Christopher “Dudus” Coke [portfolio]

TRACIAN MEIKLE ET RIVKE JAFFE

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Résumé

In 2010, Christopher “Dudus” Coke, one of Jamaica’s most powerful “dons”, was arrested and extradited to the United States, where he is currently serving a sentence of 23 years in federal prison for arms and drugs trafficking. The myth surrounding Dudus has been scripted and re-scripted, going through multiple phases of visual elaboration. Only a few photographs have circulated in the press and these scarce images have played a central role in initially reinforcing and then dismantling the myth surrounding his persona. Through its analysis of the case of Christopher Coke and other Jamaican “dons”, this visual essay argues for attention to the models of masculinity underlying myth-scripting, and the connections between masculinity and in/visibility.

Entrées d’index

Keyword : dons, legitimacy, visual culture, masculinity, Jamaica.
In this brief essay, we discuss processes of myth-scripting surrounding Christopher “Dudus” Coke, one of Jamaica’s most powerful “dons”, who was extradited to the US in 2010 and is currently serving 23 years in federal prison for arms and drugs trafficking. We trace the visual scripting and re-scripting of Dudus’ myth through three phases, each characterized by the absence or dominance of specific images. We concentrate, first, on a few widely circulated photographs that we read as central in initially strengthening, and then dismantling, the myth surrounding his persona. (fig. 1) Next, we situate these photographs within a broader visual tradition of portraying dons. In a general absence of photographs, dons tend to be visualized primarily in the memorial murals that are commissioned after their death. Our discussion concentrates on the meaning of these photographs and murals in terms of the visuality of myth-making, emphasizing the models of masculinity underlying myth-scripting, and the connections between masculinity and in/visibility. Our reading of this visual myth-scripting draws on an analysis of these images and a broader corpus of portraits of dons, and on our respective long-term ethnographic research on donmanship and its visual culture, conducted primarily over the period 2014 – 2018 (Tracian) and 2008 – 2014 (Rivke) in different parts of Kingston.

Fig. 1. Photo of Christopher « Dudus Coke » circulating at the moment of his arrest, unknown date
The rise and fall of Christopher “Dudus” Coke

Dudus’ story connects to the roots of donmanship in Jamaica. Dons are informal leaders who take on a strong governance role within one or more low-income urban communities, who tend to be involved in criminal activities, and who frequently have strong ties to one of Jamaica’s two main political parties. Dudus’ father, Lester “Jim Brown” Coke, was one of the island’s first major dons. He used his clientelist connections to the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the proceeds from his involvement in the transnational drugs trade, as the leader of the so-called Shower Posse, to rule and provide for the West Kingston neighborhood of Tivoli Gardens. Jim Brown died in a mysterious prison fire in 1992, while awaiting extradition to the United States on drugs and weapons trafficking charges. This occurred shortly after the murder of his oldest son, Mark “Jah T” Coke, who had been set to follow in his footsteps, and instead Dudus took over the helm of his father’s operation.

Dudus’ connections to the drugs trade continued to generate significant income, but he also diversified his economic activities, establishing legal businesses in the construction, security and entertainment industries. While the success of his companies meant he was less reliant on the government for patronage, he maintained close ties with the JLP. He channeled funds from his businesses into Tivoli Gardens, and maintained an informal system of policing and conflict resolution. The national security forces turned a blind eye to these activities, not only because of Dudus’ political connections, but also because his leadership was associated with a measure of peace in an area generally affected by high rates of crime and violence. Known as “the President”, he was not only considered the don of Tivoli Gardens, but could also wield influence over urban communities elsewhere on the island and even in the US or UK.

However, in August 2009, the United States submitted a request to the Jamaican government for Dudus’ extradition. This request was initially contested by the Jamaican government, which was led by the JLP at the time. Nine months later, on May 19, 2010, after significant diplomatic pressure from the US, and increasing censure from civil society and the Jamaican opposition party (the People’s National Party, or PNP), the then Prime Minister, Bruce Golding, signed the extradition request, allowing the security forces to arrest Dudus in order to hand him over to the United States. In response, Tivoli Gardens residents staged a public protest in the downtown Kingston business district, while gunmen aligned with Dudus executed preemptive attacks on the security forces in different parts of the city. On May 23, security forces entered the community of Tivoli Gardens by force, and by the end of a three-day security operation that became known as the “Tivoli Incursion” over 70 people were killed. Dudus himself was neither harmed or captured in the onslaught and for weeks continued to evade arrest. On June 22, 2010, police acting on the basis of intelligence apprehended Dudus in a car driven by Reverend Al Miller, a popular evangelical pastor, allegedly on his way to surrender to the US embassy. Having waived his right to an extradition trial, Dudus was quickly extradited to the United States, where he received a 23-year sentence, which he is currently serving in a low-security federal correctional institution in New Jersey.

Visual myth scripts

In many ways, Dudus was a classic “social bandit”: while his system of rule was extra-legal, he enjoyed a large measure of legitimacy, not only amongst Tivoli Gardens residents but also far beyond. His success as a governance actor, businessman and
political liaison – and, relatedly, his successful ability to engage in criminal activities without being captured by the state or harmed by rivals – was bolstered by his reputation as a virtuous outlaw, a Robin Hood-like protector of the poor rather than a self-interested drugs kingpin.

This heroic reputation – this myth script – had a strong narrative, textual dimension. Popular stories of Dudus’ good deeds circulated orally, primarily in Kingston’s impoverished downtown areas. In addition, following the US extradition request in 2009, various popular musicians came out with songs that scripted Dudus as a hero rather than a villain. This type of musical myth-scripting has a longer history in Jamaica – examples of reggae and dancehall artists lauding dons stretch back decades.4

Dons are also iconized through visual representations, specifically in street art, and are often depicted next to other local, national and international heroes, from sports champions and reggae stars to politicians and religious figures.5 Yet these murals of dons are exclusively of deceased men – they are memorial murals, as we discuss in more detail below. While living dons may be referenced in textual graffiti, they are never depicted recognizably in street art until after their death.

In our contemporary media-saturated context, visual images often play a key role in the creation of celebrities, heroes, icons. For social bandits, visual myth-scripting has an evident risk: even as it might enhance their reputation, it can also impede their ability to move about freely, to evade capture. In Jamaica, therefore, both photographs and artistic visual representations of living dons have become taboo. Dons are feared for their violent enforcing of the rule that informer fi dead, those who “snitch” to the police deserve to die. While less well known than this code of silence, dons’ capacity to limit the circulation of their image – in a society with ubiquitous smartphone and social media use – represents a similar form of control over flows of information.

When photographs of dons do emerge in public culture, how do they contribute to myth-making? How does power over images connect to power through images? And how do both the suppression and the intentional dissemination of very specific images connect to models of masculinity in these processes of legitimization and delegitimization? Below, we discuss a few key photographs of Dudus and draw connections between these images and the memorial murals of deceased dons, in order to sketch a preliminary answer to such questions.

From unseeability to visible cool to feminized vulnerability

In an initial phase, prior to the extradition process, Dudus was invisible. His power lay precisely in his ability to remain unseen, illegible, unknowable. There was no social media presence, and there were no pictures of him circulating in the press, no murals on any walls (although the graffiti writer and singer LA Lewis painted a textual message of support near the border of Tivoli Gardens (fig. 2). In addition, few people spoke his name out loud. They might refer to him as “the President” or “the one who runs things in Tivoli”, but the name “Dudus” was only whispered, if that. In fact, middle-class Jamaicans initially did not know whether his name was pronounced Doo-dus, or Duh-duss (the latter was correct). To those in the know, his power seemed to be everywhere, with his influence extending far beyond Tivoli Gardens to other communities across Jamaica and into the diaspora in London, Miami, New York and Toronto. Precisely this combination of omnipresence and visual obscurity, we suggest, was central to his myth, and imbued him with an almost divine aura.

Fig. 2. One Doduss, Kingston, 2008
We identify a second phase in the visual script of his myth, which started when the US requested Dudus’ extradition in summer 2009. Media attention increased immediately, but only a handful of photos – all very grainy, low-quality images – surfaced. The main national newspapers used a black-and-white photograph of Dudus as a child to discuss his rise from a star student to head of a crime syndicate. The photo that was used most was of him in his twenties or thirties, striking a cool but casual pose, with a beer in his hand, relaxed but in control (fig. 3).

**Fig. 3. Young Dudus, date unknown**

His “unseeability” may have been dented by the circulation of this image, which made him recognizable to a larger public, but this photo itself supported and strengthened his persona as a cool, masculine leader. A more official photograph of Dudus was apparently not available for use by these prominent newspapers, nor were any other images circulating online. This continued absence of photographs confirmed his power to remain out of the public eye, to suppress the reproduction of his likeness. In combination with the masculine aura the image projected, this sustained power to control his visibility enhanced rather than detracted from his mythical status.
A third phase commenced when Dudus was captured in late June 2010. At this time, a much larger number of photographs began to circulate, in national and international newspapers, and through social media. A first set of images, which was reproduced extensively in the global media, depicted the don in a rumpled shirt and jeans, being led by Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agents, a chubby figure with a sheepish smile (fig. 4).

He looked submissive, powerless, uncool. Shortly after, another image was leaked to the press. Apparently, Dudus had been traveling across the island in disguise, wearing a curly wig, granny glasses and a plain hat, a costume broadly interpreted as a woman’s outfit. In what appeared to be a mugshot, he stares at the camera, with a resigned look, obviously aware of the indignity of being captured – physically and visually – in such an outfit (fig. 5).
This mugshot in particular led to much ridicule, with unsubstantiated reports circulating that Dudus was wearing a pink wig. The day after Dudus was apprehended in Al Miller’s car, the *Jamaica Observer* featured a drawing by the country’s main cartoonist, Clovis, in which a heavily armed police officer leans into a car with a pink-wigged passenger asking the driver: “Hey Al, is who dah pretty girl beside yu?” (fig. 6). In a different visual tradition, as part of the series *The Dudus Chronicles* he exhibited in the uptown Kingston Grosvenor Galleries in 2010, Belizean artist Hubert Neal Jr. also emphasized this feminization in his depiction of the same scene in a painting titled “Driving Miss Dudus” (fig. 7). While the visual feminization was most marked in the wig photograph and its popular reimagination, in both of the post-capture photographs, Dudus – aged 42 at the time – looked like an aging, weak man, quite the opposite of the virile figure of the first photo circulated in the press.
Memorials and masculinity

The negotiations of masculinity in these different photographs can be read in light of a broader corpus of images of dons, in street art. Given the lack of circulating photographs, memorial murals tend to be the primary visual medium through which dons are remembered publicly. These murals are generally painted by local artists on the basis of photographs in possession of the close friends or family of a deceased don. Friends and family commission the murals to express their personal grief at losing a loved one. Yet in the context of neighborhoods where dons often play an important governance role, these public forms of commemoration also reflect and reaffirm a sociopolitical order – they are not so different from more formal types of public monuments that commemorate political leaders after their death. And like statues of kings, politicians, military heroes, the murals memorializing dons also draw on specific models of masculinity to legitimize their rule. Here we discuss how in/visibility and masculinity feature in these public images.

Fig. 8. Mural commemorating Gwana, Kingston, 2017
The relationship between photographs and murals was evident in the repainting of Gwana’s mural (fig. 8). Gwana, who died in 2001, was a don in “Gullyland” (the name we use for the neighborhood where Tracian did much of her research). The artists who are commissioned to paint these murals rely on photographs to achieve an accurate portrayal. For Gwana’s new mural, this was not an easy task. As Tracian discussed starting the mural with Gwana’s friends Roger, Brandon and Chad, the conversation quickly turned to where they would find a photograph of him, to use as the basis for the memorial mural. “You know say him never have nuff picture because him a badman”, Brandon remarked – there were never many pictures of him because he was a badman, a criminal. He decided to go to one of Gwana’s “baby mothers” to see if they had any photos of him. At the time of Gwana’s death in 2002 – before the popularity of digital photography – lovers would often give each other pictures, which you might find tucked in the sides of the mirrors of dressers in their bedroom. However, Brandon’s plan proved unsuccessful and the problem of finding a photograph of Gwana remained unresolved for some time. In the end, the only picture of him that could be found was the one on his funeral program, which one of his elder relatives had saved in a manila envelope in her home.

Gwana, then, appeared to have been successful in maintaining a large measure of photographic invisibility. In the one photograph that remained, he exudes a cool masculinity, sporting an expensive watch, and dressed stylishly in a matching name-
brand T-shirt and baseball cap. Like the first image of Dudus that circulated, he is featured casually holding a drink. Yet unlike that photograph, in which Dudus appears relaxed, posing with an easy laugh, Gwana’s posture is more wary, his expression serious. With his eyes concealed behind dark sunglasses and his face partially hidden under his cap, he stares at us with a bit of a frown on his face, yet we are unable to meet his gaze.

**Fig. 9. Mural commemorating Willie Haggart, Kingston, 2017**

A similar association between liquor and male coolness is found in a mural of Willie Haggart (fig. 9), the former don of a section of Trench Town known as Black Roses Corner. Haggart, who died in 2001, had strong ties to the PNP (various senior politicians attended his funeral), but he was also known as a fun-loving “party don”. He owned a bar and was associated with dancehall parties, with a dance move – the Willie Bounce – named after him. This reputation comes through in a mural painted on the side of his bar, where he and two friends – one apparently a dancehall artist or MC – raise their cocktail glasses in a toast. Haggart wears the visual trappings of wealth: a large gold chain, watch and rings. Flanked by his friends, he is clearly at the center of the party, while his masculinity is also emphasized by the femininity of the three skimpily clad, sensually posed women, who dance and drink below the men. Yet Haggart too is unsmiling, a man to be taken seriously even as he parties.

**Fig. 10. Mural commemorating Roundhead, Kingston, 2017**
The mural commemorating Roundhead (fig. 10), a former Gullyland don, is more sober, although his diamond earrings and expensive motorcycle point to wealth and perhaps a predilection for bling. Like many memorial murals, the background is a blue sky with doves, a visual echo of the programs distributed at funerals. Roundhead stares straight at us with an unflinching gaze. While the text below his bust expresses the affection and grief of those who commissioned the mural – “Love, we miss you” – the words framed at the top of the mural allow Roundhead himself to speak, asserting and emphasizing his capacity to act violently: “Mi know dem fear mi”, I know they fear me. Coupled with the somber, cool representation, these words serve to reinforce the don’s authority as a serious figure, a leader amongst men.

Fig. 11. Mural commemorating Altyman, Kingston, 2017
A similar style is found in the commemorative portrait of Altyman (Figure 10), another Gullyland don. Painted on a zinc sheet, the artwork was revealed at a memorial dance held in his honor. Altyman’s daughter explained to Tracian that his family had commissioned the portrait to honor his role in the community: “We had to put him up because him was a legend in the community”, while another resident, Adam, agreed that it was important for the neighborhood to publicly recognize this political history: “Like how him is the don, them have to put him up, ‘cause him is the idol. And so people come in the community and know that him is the don”. Strung up high, the painting not only overlooked the crowd at the crossroads, it also loomed over two other murals of Gullyland men who had died violently, reminding us that Altyman remains “One Don”, the only man in charge. Altyman’s style is even less flashy than that of Roundhead; he wears a plain shirt and no jewelry. Yet here too we see his wealth expressed through the inclusion of an expensive vehicle, a Cadillac, while the skyscrapers behind him reference his connection to foreign cities, hinting at a past involvement in drugs trafficking but more broadly associating him with the coveted capacity to travel internationally.

The four murals discussed here all present variations on a type of cool masculinity. They visualize dons as men whose agency is not in question. They confront our gaze with a confident pose and a serious gaze, unruffled and in control in death as in life – loved but also feared; never forgotten, the don forever. They establish their authority unsmilingly, with little playfulness in evidence even as they are surrounded by liquor, women and fast cars. These forms of portraiture, part of a larger tradition of honoring heroes through mural art, inscribe dons into public history and contribute directly to the myth-making that legitimizes the system of donmanship.

In this brief essay, we have sought to show how in/visibility and masculinity connect in the processes of myth-making and legitimization surrounding dons. We have illustrated the tensions between visibility and invisibility by tracing Dudus’ rise and fall from power, sketching the different visual phases that accompanied his trajectory as a don. Being mythically omnipresent, but not visually available, might be considered to be the most powerful position: a don’s myth is strengthened by the distance that is created when only a select few persons have visual access to him. We argue that much of this myth-based power was maintained during the second phase when Dudus did
become visible, as the image that was circulated bolstered an image of leadership characterized by virility, coolness and strength. However, his power diminished while he was on the run, then captured by the police, and subsequently imprisoned and convicted – a downfall we can see reflected visually, as apparently deliberately feminizing images were circulated globally. We have sought to underline the connection between this visual negotiation of masculinity and the gendered models of leadership that are visible in the memorial murals commissioned after the death of a don. Through an exploration of the public visibility of Dudus and a number of deceased dons, we see how the myth-scripting of informal leaders such as dons is influenced by a combination of the manipulation of their in/visibility and by the markers of masculinity conveyed through those images that may be circulated at a later stage. This combination impacts the myths surrounding their leadership – the power asserted over and through such images can serve to strengthen their authority, but can equally serve to undermine it.

Notes


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